

CARE International in Uganda

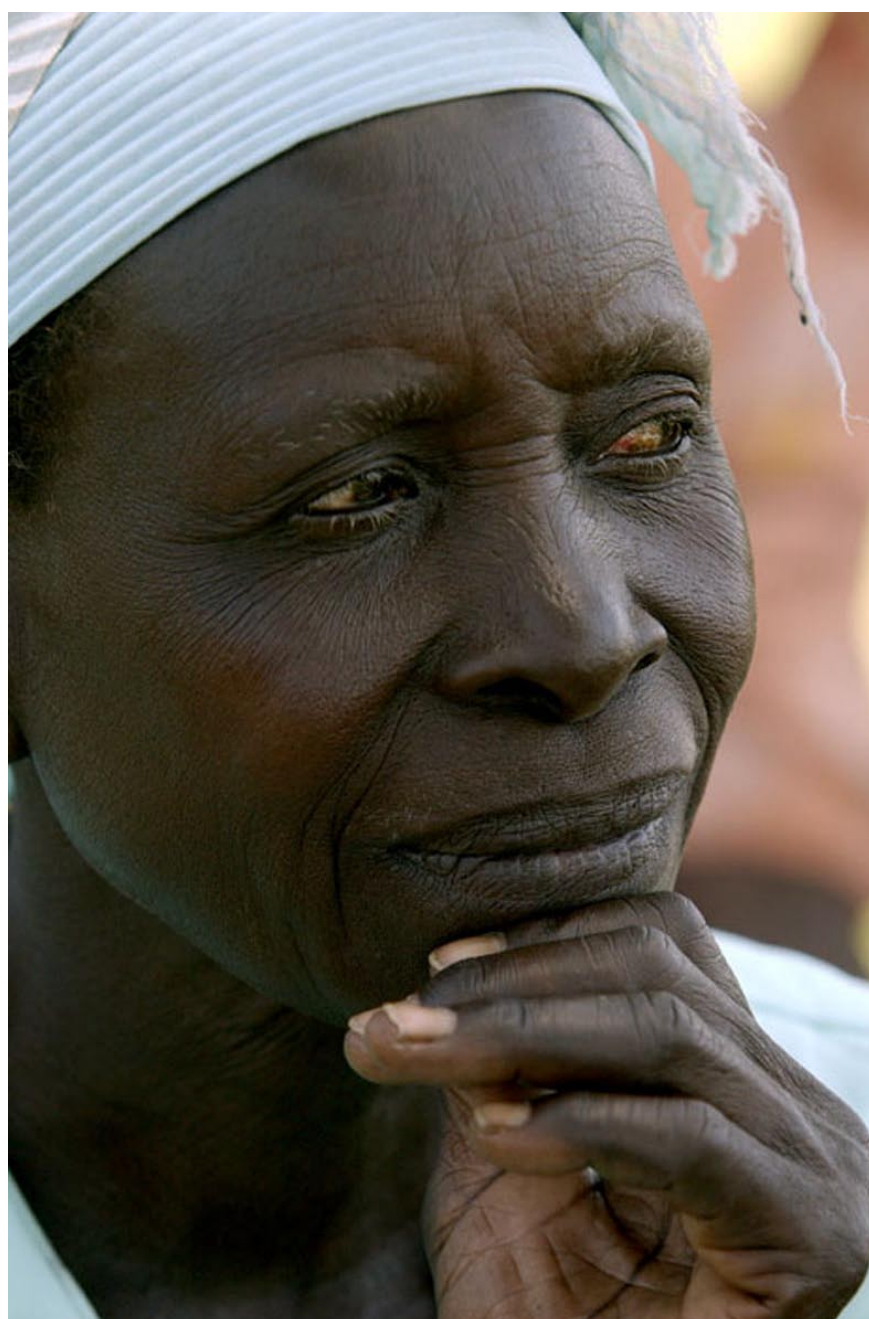
Policy Brief

March 2007



“We are longing for peace every day and every night.”

Views of women in IDP camps on the Uganda peace negotiations



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The peace negotiations between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the government of Uganda offer a tremendous opportunity to unite the country after more than 20 years of war.

CARE has extensive experience working with communities affected by the violence in northern Uganda, and is deeply involved in peace building efforts, as well as efforts to empower women. Through our work in 30 camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) in Gulu district, CARE has seen firsthand how women affected by the conflict have become forces for peace and reconciliation within their communities, doing everything from helping reintegrate former child soldiers to calling for negotiations.

As civilians most affected by the conflict, and as the grandmothers, mothers and sisters of those still with the LRA, women have a critical role to play in trying to bring peace to their communities.

CARE recently conducted a survey on the peace talks among 75 women in six IDP camps in Gulu district. The survey shows that women are powerful voices for peace, and yet they are not being heard.

Key findings

1. Ninety-six percent of the women surveyed urged the LRA to put an end to the conflict and continue to engage in the peace negotiations. Overall, the message from the women interviewed to the parties engaged in the peace negotiations was clear: “Come to a compromise and sign the peace agreement so people can return home.”
2. Many of the women (68 percent) stressed the need for reconciliation processes that directly involve affected communities and/or tribal structures in the north.
3. Not surprisingly, nearly 90 percent of women also emphasized the need for women to participate in the peace talks, while more than 80 percent mentioned the need for at least some direct representatives to be drawn from women living in affected communities. More than 50 percent of the women interviewed raised the specific concern that their views were not being adequately represented by the current negotiation team.
4. There were serious doubts as to whether the current peace process would be successful—a little more than half of the respondents were unsure if the talks would deliver peace. According to one woman: “[Peace] is doubtful because the two parties are not compromising.”
5. There does seem to be a peace dividend from the negotiations, with many saying that security in the camps had improved since the peace talks began. Respondents reported more freedom of movement, less gunfire and fewer abductions as a result of the talks. According to one woman: “[Security] was worse in the past. Before there was gunfire and rebels, and we had to run from them and sleep in the bush.”
6. For the respondents, family ties were the driving force behind the need for reconciliation and many stated that peace talks were the only way to achieve reconciliation and the only way that children would come home. As one woman said: “The LRA are our own children.”

CARE recommendations at a glance

1. Women must be effectively represented in the peace talks as mandated by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. At a minimum, this calls for one affected woman on the peace negotiating team(s) who represents the views and aspirations of her peers.
2. Both the government of Uganda and the LRA peace teams should be given time, following each step of the agenda, to consult with the people of Uganda on specific agenda items, such as reconciliation, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) and greater political participation for marginalized areas.
3. Civil society organizations and the government of Uganda should step up preparations for the DDR process for the LRA.
4. International engagement and robust support to help resolve this conflict must take place without delay. Leadership on the part of the regional and international community, particularly donor governments, must be clearly demonstrated by providing political and financial support for the peace talks as well as technical assistance
5. The LRA should release non-combatants and sick and wounded combatants for treatment as part of ongoing measures to build confidence between the LRA and the government of Uganda.
6. The government of Uganda must address the disparities in development between northern and southern Uganda for any peace to be sustainable.

Women's Voices:

The Need for Peace and Reconciliation

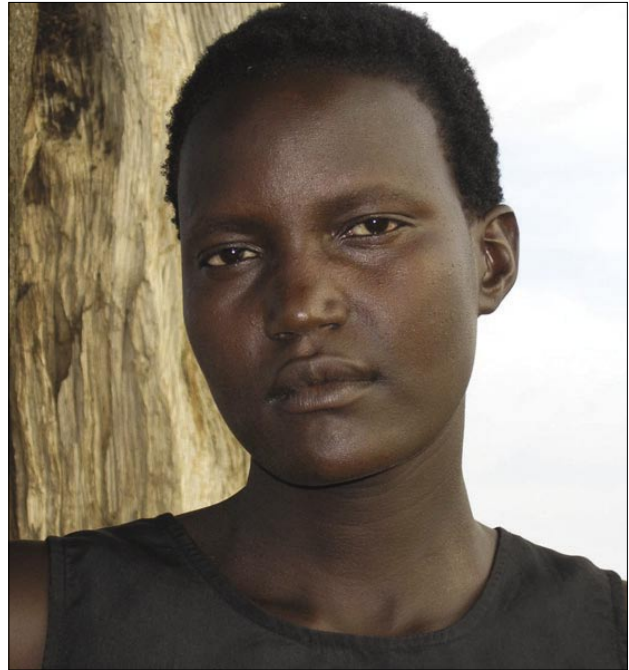
Peace and reconciliation go hand in hand for the women interviewed. All 75 women want peace and see a need for reconciliation, and many spoke of how the violence has left no one untouched. "There's no one in the region that does not have a relative that has been abducted or killed," said one woman. At the height of the conflict, 901 people died in northern Uganda every week as a direct result of violence and the conditions within the IDP camps.¹

Ninety-six percent of the women urged the LRA to put an end to the conflict through the peace negotiations. Virtually all answers given referenced the peace process by appealing to the LRA to listen to the community and its leaders, to the government, to civil society and to the international community. The most consistent thread among the responses was a recommendation to uphold the ceasefire and to disarm. One respondent gave voice to a common sentiment by urging the LRA to have faith that a return to the community was possible despite their past actions:

"The LRA should accept that their community will accept them." Another respondent offered that "if they can agree to sign a peace agreement then we will do whatever we can do to support them."

At the same time, 93 percent of the women supported the government's continued engagement in the peace process with the LRA. According to another woman: "The LRA should accept their mistakes in order for the community to reconcile with them. The government and the LRA have each done wrong to the other and should accept their mistakes."

"Come to a compromise and sign peace so people can return home."



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Women's Representation in the Peace Process

Respondents overwhelmingly called for increased representation by women in the peace process—in particular, that women from the camps themselves should be represented. Nearly 90 percent of the respondents said women should participate in the peace talks, while more than 80 percent said that at least some representatives should come from the camps for internally displaced persons.

More than half of the women interviewed felt their views were not being represented by the current negotiation team. Over and over again, respondents voiced concern that representatives to the peace process did not understand the suffering experienced by those communities most affected by the conflict.

"Women aren't heard properly," said one woman. Another woman elaborated, "I am afraid that my views are not represented [at Juba]. Most people there are men and not from here. ... They should have taken the people who tasted the soup of the war—those who have really seen the worst part of this war."

According to one woman: "I have not heard that women are represented at the talks, but they must be. Ordinary women from the camps—not elected, not the camp leaders. They should talk, not just sit and watch." Another woman added: "Women's views are being represented by political women. Local women should go and be delegates." Others echoed this view: "Women from the camp should go as representatives because they're the ones suffering;" "The people who are there haven't seen what we have seen."

Further, many of the women questioned the motives of those currently involved in the negotiations, stating that for many, peace might not be their main objective: "Representatives should be women leaders from the camp and women members of parliament because they know the problems. Those that come from other countries don't want the talks to end. They're just talking." As another woman said: "Other men are there for money. Women need to go to say [the] real situation."

Respondents saw it as their right to participate in the peace process, with one woman citing the Acholi proverb that "even female dogs hunt." Still others made it clear that women's participation would help to resolve the conflict: "If women are there [at the peace talks], yes, there is hope for peace."

Women from the camps are very eager to participate in the talks. Several respondents volunteered to be representatives, including an elderly woman who said: "If they could take local people—if they could take me, I'm ready to go."



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Recommendation

1. Women must be effectively represented in the peace talks as mandated by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.

At a minimum, this calls for one affected woman on the peace negotiating team(s) who represents the views and aspirations of her peers. Both the government of Uganda and the LRA should explicitly recognize the need for and value of women's representation in the peace talks and take immediate action to facilitate their participation. As resolution 1325 affirms, women have a key role to play "in the resolution of conflicts and in peace building."² Their words carry power. According to one woman: "If the views of Acholi women had been represented, then the peace agreement would have been signed already."

Community Participation in the Peace Process

The majority of the women interviewed (68 percent) said reconciliation processes should involve affected communities in northern Uganda and/or northern tribal structures. According to one woman: "Mostly the community must reconcile with the LRA because otherwise there will be blame—'you killed my son' and the LRA will go back to the bush." Some women further emphasized that they had suffered at the hands of both the LRA and the Ugandan government. As one woman said: "When they [the government] brought us to the camps, they killed many, and raped."

The remaining respondents described reconciliation as a more limited process. Eighteen percent of the women thought that only the government and the LRA should be involved in the reconciliation process, while 8 percent saw no role for the government. These respondents said that reconciliation should be between only the LRA and affected communities and/or northern tribes. A single respondent said the focus of the reconciliation process should be between the government and the community.

Very few respondents (12 percent) mentioned the need for reconciliation between the North and South. These women have experienced the conflict as a “local” conflict, affecting only northern tribes, and do not see how it has affected the entire nation.

Recommendations

2. Both the government of Uganda and the LRA peace teams should be given time, following each step of the agenda, to consult with the people of Uganda on specific agenda items, such as reconciliation, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), and greater political participation for marginalized areas.

It is critical that those communities that are directly affected by the conflict participate in these consultations in order to build community support and ownership of the peace process. In this way, an agreement will be both designed and perceived to benefit all of the Ugandan people, rather than being a compact solely between the government and the LRA. The consultations should be carried out along a specific timeline, however, in order not to lose momentum at the same time that support is being built for peace. Donor governments should demonstrate their support of the peace process by supplying the additional financial and logistical resources necessary to carry out these consultations.

3. Civil society organizations and the government of Uganda should step up preparation for the DDR process for the LRA.

“Without the support of the international community, the peace talks won’t succeed.”

Concerns about the Peace Process

There were serious doubts as to whether the current negotiations would result in peace. A little more than half of the women were unsure that the talks would deliver peace. According to one woman: “[Peace] is doubtful because the two parties are not compromising.” From the women’s perspective, if negotiations are to succeed: “Both parties and delegates should have just one hat, for peace.” Some cited concerns about political interests as grounds for their uncertainty: “It has been turned into a political process with politicians trying to say they did this or that, to win favor but not because they have the interests of the community at heart,” said one respondent.

Another respondent said financial interests were clouding the talks: “Delegates in Juba should talk the truth instead of doing business.”

Twenty-one percent of women interviewed referred to the International Criminal Court indictments against the LRA. Ten of the women said the indictments should be removed because they were an impediment to peace and reconciliation, while the remaining six urged that warrants be carried out if the peace talks failed and/or the advice of the international community was refused.

The majority of women interviewed (45 out of 75) proposed varying levels of direct support for the peace talks by the international community. Their recommendations ranged from brokering the talks to advising and mediating between and reconciling the parties. As the quotes below show, there is a belief that only through the direct involvement of the international community will the talks succeed:

- “The conflict has taken a long time and government alone cannot control all. The international community should help really—this is a plea for support.”
- “The international community should be involved, not sit back, so there is peace.”

- “The international community should mediate the peace process so it succeeds. We have seen what the process has been without support—if they are there they will keep the process from [breaking down into] start/stop fighting, and talk [instead].”
- “The international community should stand firm on the peace process so it doesn’t slip away. It must bear fruit.”
- “The international community should be represented so that both sides [at the negotiating table] don’t take these peace talks for granted.”
- “Without the support of the international community, the peace talks won’t succeed.”

According to one woman: “If the talks fail, then the international community should come and arrest both parties because it’s obvious they want to see people suffer and aren’t interested in our well-being.”

The women interviewed also placed a lot of stock in the ability of civil society to have a positive influence on the peace talks. Eighty percent of respondents (61 out of 75) recommended that civil society be engaged in and support the peace process.



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Recommendation

4. International engagement and robust support to help resolve this conflict must be mobilized without delay. Leadership on the part of the regional and international community, particularly donor governments, must be clearly demonstrated by providing political and financial support for the peace talks as well as technical assistance. The international community should openly endorse the process and concerned countries should have a representative at the talks to offer on the spot support. Many of the women interviewed stressed the important role that other actors—ranging from the international community to local civil society organizations—have to play if the talks are to be successful.

The Importance of Family Ties

The conversations with the women made it evident that family reunification is the principal motivation for reconciliation and peace. According to 2006 figures, the LRA has abducted more than 25,000 children over the course of the war.³ Many women in the camps, especially the older women, had their children abducted by the LRA: “My fifth born was abducted in 2002 and I don’t know if he is dead or alive.”

Many of the women stressed these family ties when discussing the need for reconciliation and forgiveness. According to one woman: “[Reconciliation is needed] because most of the rebels in the bush were abducted. It was not their wish so they are innocent.” Nearly a third of respondents (24 of 75) said it was critical to fight the stigma and blame attached to the LRA for committing murders and atrocities for their reintegration into the community to be successful.

“The LRA are our own children.”

Recommendation

5. The LRA should release non-combatants and sick and wounded combatants for treatment as part of ongoing measures to build confidence between the LRA and the government. This release would provide a quick “win” for both sides and serve as encouragement for negotiations.

Peace Dividends

Many women reported that security in the camps had improved since the peace talks began. According to one woman: “[Security] was worse in the past. Before there was gunfire and rebels and we had to run from them and sleep in the bush.”

Other women elaborated: “Before you could be abducted from your field. Now we can go back to our home villages and farm and then come back [to the camp]—you can even cook there [at your home village].” According to another: “Since the peace talks started, there is some improvement. Before they started, the LRA killed so many women and took so many children from school.”

Another woman summed up the situation by saying “there is some security now, with the talks; we are focused on this.”

“If the views of Acholi women had been represented, then the peace agreement would have been signed already.”



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Recommendation

6. The government of Uganda must address the gulf in development between the northern and southern parts of Uganda if reconciliation is to be achieved and peace is to last. “Poverty eradication remains the central objective of the government of Uganda,” according to the foreword of the Government’s Poverty Eradication Action Plan.⁴ In reviewing progress over the past three years, the plan acknowledges that “income poverty increased from 34 percent to 38 percent of the population coupled with increase in inequality.” The plan also commits the government to “work with civil society organizations, faith-based groups and traditional leaders in conflict resolution and the peace building process.”⁵ As the peace process continues, the government must fund action to build a nationwide constituency for peace, reconciliation and the reintegration of the country. Concrete steps must be taken to bring parties together, foster communication and exchanges among groups of cultural, religious and political leaders and ensure that northern Uganda joins the mainstream of Ugandan life.

Notes

- ¹ Counting the cost-Twenty years of war in northern Uganda report by the Civil Society Organisations for Peace in Northern Uganda (CSOPNU), March 30, 2006, p. 7
- ² United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, operative paragraph 5.
- ³ Counting the cost CSOPNU report, p. 8
- ⁴ Government of Uganda Poverty Eradication Plan 2004/5-2007/8, foreword
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 102

Methodology

This report is based on interviews conducted in November, 2006, with 75 women living in six different camps for internally displaced persons in Gulu district (Palenga, Pagak, Opit, Acet, Awach and Koro Abili IDP camps). Women were interviewed in both individual and group settings, with groups ranging from four to eleven people.

All interviews were conducted by CARE staff. Interviews were done in Acholi and translated by staff from CARE and partner NGOs, with the exception of two interviews done in English.

Interviews were kept confidential, with no names to identify respondents. Quotes are not attributable by name and do not necessarily correspond with any pictures in this report. Some respondents volunteered to have their photographs featured in the report.



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