

Child soldiers or war affected children? Why the formerly abducted children of northern Uganda are not child soldiers

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In many places around the globe, over many centuries, adults have forcibly involved children in war. In more recent times, these forcibly involved children have come to be collectively referred to as 'child soldiers', in an attempt to address the crises that these children experience within war conditions. However, recent field experiences from northern Uganda show that children, formerly abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army, as well as the community they return to, do not consider themselves as soldiers. This paper explains the reasons why the children reject this categorisation and prefer to be regarded as war affected. This paper concludes with the warning that erroneous categorisation of war affected children might influence, and/or undermine, the effectiveness of targeted intervention programmes.

Keywords: abducted children, child soldiers, northern Uganda

Introduction

Historically, there are myriad examples of children being used in war, as combatants; however, it is really over the last few decades in Africa that this use of children has come to prominent attention. Studies on children and war in Africa have been done in Liberia (Sendabo, 2004), Mozambique (Leão, 2005; Maslen, 1997) and Angola (Imogen, 2005, Human Rights Watch, 2003), among others. This involvement of children in war has led to this group of children to be commonly referred to as 'child soldiers'.

The concept of 'child soldiers' and the humanitarian industry

Despite this long history of children's involvement in war, the etymology of the word 'child soldiers' is not clear. For their part, the international legal frameworks concerning children and war, specifically the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2000) do not use the term child soldiers. On the other hand the benchmark, United Nations commissioned, The Graca Machel Report (1996) study on the impact of armed conflict on children employs the phrase.

It is UNICEF and the NGO Working Group on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in their Cape Town symposium, that first defined a child soldier as:

'Child soldier . . . any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. The definition includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms' (UNICEF, 1997).

Although offering a definition does not amount to being the authors of the term *child*

soldiers, this seems a clear indication that the use of the concept originated from the humanitarian quarters. Since then, writers (such as Eichstaedt (2009) *First Kill your Family: Child Soldiers of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army*; Sendabo (2004) *Child Soldiers: Rehabilitation and Social Reintegration in Liberia*; Human Rights Watch's (2003), *Forgotten Fighters: Child Soldiers in Angola*; and Skinner (1999) *Child soldiers in Africa: A Disaster for Future Families*) have used the concept to refer to children who have been through war, even if such children were forcibly abducted.

A decade after the Cape Town symposium, the Paris Principles (initiated to update the original Cape Town Principles using a child rights based approach) did not use the concept *child soldiers*. The Paris Principles refer to children who have been caught up in armed conflict as simply children, or boys and girls. This is understandable, given that the document admittedly *'incorporates knowledge and lessons learnt in particular, emphasizes the informal ways in which boys and girls both become associated with and leave armed groups'* (UNICEF, 2007:5).

The kind of nomenclature used, and influenced by, the earlier Cape Town Principles is what the author has referred to elsewhere as a *'fire brigade'* attitude (Angucia, 2009; 2010). It is a type of language that appeals to the emotions, and appears to drum for support to act and/or raise awareness of the issue of children caught up in conflict. This is especially true in the west, where the inhuman experiences of people in the third world caught up in political turmoil are sometimes inconceivable. It is understandable, considering the scale of humanitarian crises that humanitarian organisations often have to avert during such political turmoil and conflicts. This *'fire brigade'* categorisation of war affected and formerly forcibly conscripted children, therefore, seems to resonate with a loud cry to do something. Often, it is a cry for more financial and other resources, such as the backing of the

international community i.e., donors and charities, action by the UN and often the establishment and enforcement of specific international legal conventions to avert similar events in the future. This kind of activism lay behind the creation of the International Criminal Court (ICC) that, in part, also hopes to bring to justice those involved in the use of children in armed conflict and flagrantly abuse them. This has succeeded through the conviction of Thomas Lubanga, of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, by the ICC in March 2012. Equally, among the charges brought about against Joseph Kony of Uganda is also the use and abuse of children in his long campaign of terror in the Great Lakes Region of Africa.

In understanding the notion of the *'fire brigade'* attitude, Skinner (1999, p9) refers to the *'reaction, usually espoused by members of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) working with child soldiers [that] view them as victims or tools of unpopular military regimes or brutally unscrupulous warlords*. Hence, the fire brigade attitude consists of two, interconnected, pillars: (1) a humanitarian problem associated with hapless victims; and (2) a need for resources to address it. It seems striking that in both of these two pillars, children are conceptualised as being objects of their condition. In this article, the author explores whether this conceptualisation of children accounts for children's lived experiences. In specific terms, addressing how fieldwork has documented how formerly abducted children operate as agents and subjects of their own situation, and how they emphasise their wish to define themselves not as *'child soldiers'*, but as individuals affected by war.

In analysing children's lived experience, the author addresses how Murphy's model of *'child soldiers'* (2003) may provide a relevant conceptualisation of the phenomenon under study in northern Uganda. Murphy (2003), in light of military patrimonialism and clientalism in Liberia and Sierra Leone, describes four models of child soldiers. His

'coerced youth model' views child soldiers as victims of coercion into military conscription. The *'revolutionary youth model'* views them as revolutionary ideologists who would like to change their society, and the *'delinquent youth model'* views child soldiers as delinquents, who seize the opportunity to be soldiers as a way out of life on the streets.. Murphy's fourth model, the *'youth clientalism model'*, explains the relationship between commanders and children as providers of social and economic protection and security in exchange for military labour, (obedience) and service. This, he says, is the case in failed or weak states, but also rooted within culture.

As this article shows, through discussion of empirical data, the experience in northern Uganda of formerly abducted children suggests that this group of children provide an account that closely matches Murphy's concept of coerced youth model. Yet, on the basis of analysis, the author argues that referring to these children as *'child soldiers'* is unwarranted, as war affected and formerly abducted children who formed the bulk of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) appear to reject that reference based on their experiences of captivity. Equally, the communities to which these children return are sensitive to referring to the children as former soldiers. In the following paragraphs, the article explores how the lived experiences of formerly abducted children show their rejection of identifying and understanding themselves as soldiers, and what is at stake in how they make sense of their involvement in conflict. Before addressing empirical findings, the historical and political context of children's engagement in conflict in northern Uganda is briefly outlined.

How children became involved in the conflict in northern Uganda

Children's involvement in armed conflict in northern Uganda is part of the collateral damage of a long political struggle, post independence, in Uganda. It has generally

been understood that the conflict is the manifestation of historical and larger political issues in the history and politics of Uganda. Specifically, the Ugandan North/South divide, created as a result of a colonisation project, has been seen to be the major cause (Ginywera-Pinchwa, 1989; Veale & Stavrou, 2003; Allen, 2006).

Apart from President Museveni's government, the other immediate protagonist of the two decade long conflict in northern Uganda is Joseph Kony, the leader of the LRA. In January 1986, the rebel National Resistance Army (NRA), led by Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, overthrew the then Lutwa government. The defeated national army, dominated by the Acholi ethnic group, fled homewards to the north and eventually became the breeding ground for various rebellions that fed into each other, but ultimately coalesced around Kony's LRA.

Historical as the causes of the conflict may be, its impact on the present day Acholi population is unprecedented in terms of mutilations, displacement and related trauma. The most unique characteristic of the conflict, however, is the overwhelming and brutal use of children by the LRA. It is said that up to 80% of the LRA were formerly abducted children, forcefully taken away from their homes, on the way to school, or sleeping at night. Some were in the gardens with their parents or just running ordinary errands around the displaced people's camps that had become home during the conflict (Angucia, 2010). These abductions are the primary way in which an estimated 30,000 children in northern Uganda came to be categorised as *'child soldiers'*, or preferably war affected, formerly abducted children.

Fieldwork: how do children make sense of their involvement in conflict?

The fieldwork this article is based on was conducted as PhD research¹ in northern Uganda, in three phases from April 2006 to

December 2008. A total of 255 parents, teachers, community elders and non abducted school going children were involved in focus group discussions (FGD) and in-depth interviews. Formerly abducted children were asked to recount their episodic life histories, from the time of abduction up to the point that the author was talking with them, at home with their parents, at the reception centres or in schools. There were a total of 27 such histories. These data were collated and analysed to generate codes, families and themes for the write up. Children telling their story of captivity and escape, expressing their inner struggles and putting in words what they were and were not is a powerful way to define what they could be considered, and not what other people think. This struggle to define themselves is called agency.

Forceful abduction is at odds with children as soldiers

Abduction was a hallmark of the conflict in northern Uganda, as has been recorded by humanitarian agencies, human rights organisations and the media (see for instance, Eichstaedt, 2009; Allen, 2006; World Vision, 2004, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2004, Veale & Stavrou, 2003). This forceful abduction into the rebel forces, vis-à-vis the connotations of soldiering as associated with the professional science of the military and being an informed chosen career as a source of livelihood, is at odds with children as soldiers.

'There were very many battles being fought – the Mamba vehicle stepped on very many and killed us. I also narrowly survived, I could not walk any more, but luckily enough, I was handed over to a kind person who gave me only a radio to carry and the only problem I faced was running in the battlefield and travelling because I was to follow him wherever he could go. And the other problem was the killing of your fellow abductees. When they order you to

kill you must do it, even if the person was related to you – in the process he will have to forgive you, because it was not your wish to do it, but it was order from above. It is a must for you to kill that person, even if she was related to you, in case you refuse to kill they will instead kill you' (child mother, interviewed at Gusco, 2006, also quoted in Angucia, 2010).

As can be seen from this quotation, this child mother's narration of the ordeal of war children in the LRA camps does not reflect the attitude of a soldier, but that of a victim-perpetrator; just part of the many children who have been affected by war, in their case in the battle field. Granted, being a child soldier is not just the event of abduction, but also a becoming through processes of bonding, training and experiences of violence committed and witnessed that the children go through (Angucia, 2010). However, after abduction and while in captivity, the formerly abducted children in northern Uganda provide accounts of complex processes of rejecting the process of becoming soldiers.

Rejection of being a soldier through use of language and bonding

The process of rejection of being a soldier is not a single event, or a consistent refusal to engage in acts of violence or killings or taking part in ambushes and so on; it is shown in language used to distance themselves from their captors, such as *'they'* – the rebel commanders ordered *'us'* – the abductees to kill that man. In one example of an interview with a formerly abducted young mother this rejection of the use of *'we'* and *'they'* is explicit.

Interviewer: *'Did you loot people's properties?'*

Formerly abducted young mother: *'No we didn't do it ourselves, it was the rebels who did it and we carried.'*

Interviewer: *'How about burning people's properties?'*

Formerly abducted young mother: *'No **we didn't burn. But they were killing people by butting their heads.***

Interviewer: *'Were you not abducting people on your way?'*

Formerly abducted young mother: *'as we move on **they kidnap**, but if you get tired and fail to walk **they kill you'***

(author's emphasis, interviewed at Gusco, 2006).

The children viewed themselves as 'prisoners' and the rebel commanders as 'soldiers'. The narration below from a young girl who returned from captivity blind clearly illustrates this:

*'... The **women rebel soldiers** did not like **us**; **they** could falsely accuse **us** of what **we** did not do. ... they could accuse us that **we the prisoners** were witches. ...'*

(author's emphasis, interviewed at Lacor, IDP camp, 2006)

Another level of rejecting association with the rebel soldiers was a form of bonding between the abducted children. This was always a risk, but the children would try to find time to talk to each other about their plight, plans for escape and to encourage each other. A child mother, who was taking care of other younger girls in captivity, reports how they discussed their escape.

'Then at night I started calling one of the girls I used to take care of. I was looking after two girls ... I called her and I said Achii today is my day of going back home, if you people are interested, then follow me, but if you don't feel like you can still stay behind. ... I just want to take you back home' (child mother interviewed at Gusco, 2006).

Hence, it seems that in as much as the formerly abducted children of northern Uganda participated in the atrocities that

characterised the war, they did so primarily for survival purposes.

Soldiering as agency

During interviews, some of the children would admit that they had killed, burnt homes and places, looted, or ambushed, but would always add that if you did not do it *'you will be killed.'*

'When they order you to kill, you must do it, even if the person was related to you, in that process he will have to forgive you, because it was not your will to do it, but it was order from above. It is a must for you to kill that person, even if she was related to you, in case you refuse to kill they will instead kill you' (interviewed at Gusco, 2006).

In fear, they choose to save themselves by doing bad things, which is both a contradiction and a dilemma that Honwana (2008, p10) refers to:

'It is difficult to regard Marula (a 'child soldier') as simply a victim who was compelled to kill and therefore bears no responsibility for his act of parricide. Yet his responsibility is different from that of a young man who kills his father for some imagined benefit. Civil war and peace engender distinct moral environments. Rather than conducting a philosophical inquiry into the degrees of guilt attributable to children and youths coerced into civil wars, the point here is to try and understand the new identities they develop in the interstitial positions.'

This paper argues this negotiating of identities in captivity is not only the essence of the victim/perpetrator notion of children within war contexts, it also indicates a form of agency, even though one with negative consequences. Boas & Hatloy (2008), referring to Honwana (2008, p71) delineate 'tactical agency' from 'strategic agency'. Tactical agency is explained as being narrow and

opportunistic, meant to cope with concrete, immediate conditions of the war environment, while strategic agency is of a longer timeframe, based on a position of power and a degree of control over self and decision making processes. To this author, these are representations of reactive agency and proactive agency, respectively. Based on these concepts, the data show how children caught up in war conditions in northern Uganda were reactively taking positions of tactical agency, as they were not in a position of proactive strategic agency. In this case, it could be argued that reactive tactical agency is a weapon for self-preservation.

Child mothers' preference for motherhood against soldiering

Of many of the girls who had to become 'wives' to the rebel commanders, many of course became 'child mothers', yet another of those ambiguous terminologies. In their histories, the girls did not dwell on their roles as soldiers. Becoming a 'wife' had given them a higher social status and different kinds of privileges in the bush (Angucia, 2010), becoming a mother was something they were at ease to be. Potentially reflecting what is acceptable in the socio-cultural context, motherhood was respectable, whereas being a bad soldier, especially for girls, was not a social benefit. Thus, difficulties of motherhood at a young age under abnormal circumstances in captivity apart, the girls rejected being a soldier in favour of motherhood.

'Then I told him that if they really know that this pregnancy belongs to them, we should leave this place and go back home. Think about my age, do you think that I can deliver in such a harsh environment. . . . Then from Khartoum I gave birth and then after sometime the aeroplane flew us to Kitgum'

(child mother interviewed at Kitgum, 2006).

Even on their return home, they viewed themselves as mothers first, often envisaging

the difficulties they would encounter bringing up their children in the absence of their bush husbands, either still in the bush or dead.

'I am now left with one child, the other one passed away . . . It is impossible for me now to go back to primary school because of this child, . . . the father of the child also passed away two months after I had escaped'

(child mother interviewed at Kitgum, 2006).

What becomes evident in these fragments is that these girls understand themselves and their worlds primarily through the lens of their motherhood, rather than from the perspective their past experiences as 'coerced soldiers'.

Escape from LRA as a way of distancing

Another strategy of distancing themselves from soldiering, most of the formerly abducted children literally escaped from LRA captivity. They left behind the most obvious symbol of soldiering, the gun. Those who escaped with it, used it as a tool for security and protection against anticipated dangers, including surprise attacks from the UPDF, the pursuing LRA and wild animals. On arrival home, they surrendered the guns to the authorities without conditions. If the escaped children of northern Uganda were interested in soldiering as a profession, they would have set political conditions for giving up their guns. They did not; they were children who had been abducted against their will, they did not have Murphy's revolutionary ideas mentioned above, not even patrimonial/client relations with the rebel commanders, they were simply coming home. They expected only acceptance back home. In the following paragraphs, how their histories were understood within the discourse of humanitarian organisations and the children's communities are explored.

The nature of reintegration programmes in northern Uganda points to war affected children, rather than soldiers

Perhaps the idea that the formerly abducted children of northern Uganda are not, after all, soldiers was behind the reception programmes in northern Uganda. There were no formal disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes, the children only came to 'psychosocial reconditioning' centres for a few weeks and were then sent home after the Uganda Amnesty Commission provided them with Amnesty certificates. On being asked in a FGD, the staff of Gulu Support the Children Organisation that was central in receiving the returned children, spoke of how their programme was centred on war affected children, and not on soldiers.

R2: *'Yah, when you look at these children they are part and parcel of us. They look like people who can still do something in future.'*

R3: *'They look like people who are innocent, but they have been forced to do things against their will.'*

R4: *'Personally, I look at these children as disadvantaged children, because when you compare them with children elsewhere in the country, the experiences these children go through are beyond compared to these other ones.'*

R5: *'In most cases when these children come, they come with the conceived ideas in their minds that when you come to the centre, this is what they are going to do for you. So what we do is give them at least some time, so as when you interact with them they get that confidence [with you] or with the environment'*

(FGD with Gusco Staff, 2006).

Even while preparing the children for reunification with their families and life within the community to which they return, the focus of the caregivers in the reception

centres is still of children who are not soldiers.

R: *'... because most of the activities in the centres here really address the problems of the children and the challenge ... this is a reception centre and it is just a temporary place after a minimum of three weeks to one month. ... by that time, we want the child to be psychologically educated and the child will be stable in their mind. The challenge might come from the community where ... in the camps [they] are given all the kinds of [problems] ... the different activities and the treatment we have been giving them from the centre for quick recovery might no longer be there at the camps. So the challenge may come again from home, but from the centre here at least all these have been catered for. Normally ... we go up to the community. ... So it is up to the scouts to address their issues. They have to talk about the problems and the need to work with children, but with special emphasis on formerly abducted children'*

(FGD with Gusco Staff, 2006).

This focus on war affected children, and not on soldiers, in northern Uganda contrasted the creation of demobilisation camps in other countries, such as Sierra Leone and Liberia, as well as the children's court in Sierra Leone where the DDR programmes were a big part of the transition from war to peace (van Gog, 2008; Krijn, 2006).

Communities helping to redeem lost childhood and not soldiers

Within the communities in northern Uganda, formerly abducted children are viewed as part of the broader group of children affected by war, but specifically considered as formerly abducted children (*lotino ma ki mako*). In local parlance, when the children are referred to as child soldiers (*lotino lo mony*), this occurs in a negative, disparaging sense. It often happens when someone is unhappy with the exhibit of

unacceptable behaviour by formerly abducted children. Otherwise, the formerly abducted children are seen as *'our children'* by parents and elders, *'our brothers and sisters'* and playmates in school settings by peers. When asked why use this mode of language despite the atrocities committed by these children, the answer was always because it was not their fault that they were abducted, echoing the argument that abduction into rebel forces is not the same thing as an informed choice of soldiering as a career.

Yet, this does not mean that the community ignores the actions of these children while they were in captivity. In fact, conversations indicated how families and communities acted watchfully over the conduct of formerly abducted children, in order to help them correct negative behaviour that had been acquired during captivity. However, decency and part of the healing process demands the use of less harmful language. During the interviews with non abducted school children, these peers emphasised how referring to formerly abducted children in terms of their *'soldiering'* past is an offence that is punishable in school. In other words, communities are giving formerly abducted children the opportunity to redeem their lost childhood, and heal themselves of the horrific experiences that occurred while in captivity.

Discussion

This study has shown how children, when invited to provide an understanding of their lived experience of being involved in conflict, emphasise a distance from their experiences in captivity, and especially their association with soldiering. By referring to themselves as *'us'* and the rebels as *'they'*, complemented this distance by seeing themselves as *'prisoners'* and not as soldiers. Equally, although stigmatisation and fear of the formerly abducted children does exist within northern Ugandan communities, an attitude of trying not to forever label these children in reference to their past experience prevails.

This was exhibited in the use of language to refer to the children in the community as formerly abducted children (*lotino ma ki mako*), instead of child soldiers (*lotino lo mony*). Therefore, it seems the widespread use of the word *'child soldier'* within the international discourse, especially as defined by the Cape Town Principles, may be initiated by the humanitarian fraternity, but does not sufficiently contain the complexities and lived experiences of these children and communities involved.

Exploring how these findings could relate to Murphy's model of *'child soldiers'*

Murphy explains that different models of child soldiers can be used to holistically explain child soldier-hood, as presented above. His categorisation of *'child soldiers'* in Liberia and Sierra Leone does not neatly sit in the experiences of the formerly abducted children of northern Uganda. The coerced youth model alone could partially explain the experiences of formerly abducted children in northern Uganda, as forcibly abducted persons, but it does not explain their rejection of any association with soldiering by means of language use. By rejecting any association with their rebel commanders shows that the fact they were coerced into a military group does not necessarily make them child soldiers.

In comparative terms, Murphy's other categorisations do not ring true in northern Uganda. As was demonstrated, the conflict in northern Uganda did not have any clear ideological nor political rooting, even from its founders. Thus, the revolutionary youth model could not explain the use of child soldiers in northern Uganda. Also, to reject the delinquent youth model, the children abducted in northern Uganda were not delinquents on the streets, or otherwise. These were children abducted from their families, on the way to school and or in their gardens. Additionally, taking into account the nature of the conflict in northern

Uganda, there was no traceable patrimonial/client relations for social support and economic purposes between the children and their captors. There could have been some military use the children were put to, in terms of being human shields on the frontline, spying, carrying loot and so on, but this type of relationship had not gone beyond the basic duties of a captured child. It is also not clear whether the children were strictly attached to single commanders the whole time they were in the bush. In fact, there is evidence that the children were frequently moved between different fighting units. Sometimes this was done to confuse the children so that they would not run away. This automatically meant changing commanders, and therefore breaking any possibilities of the development of Murphy's patrimonial/client relations.

To conclude, these findings indicate that widely used international concepts such as *'child soldiers'* and explanatory models should be applied sparingly, or guardedly, in specific conflicts and socio-cultural contexts. Mentally, the concept conjures images of a child and then a soldier who should normally be an adult skilled in soldiering; mental images that are rather difficult to reconcile. Drawing on Honwana shows that it is not just this research that finds this concept as a dilemma:

"The binary child soldier produces an oxymoron, a hybrid that conflates victim and perpetrator: child soldiers find themselves in an unsanctioned position between childhood and adulthood. They are still undeniably very young but no longer innocent; they acquire the skills of seasoned soldiers but are not adults yet. The possession of guns and a licence to kill removes them from childhood. They are located in a twilight zone; a transition in which the worlds of childhood and adulthood "rub against each other in...uneasy intimacy"

(Honwana, 2008, p10)

Therefore, the indiscriminate use of an ambiguous concept like *'child soldier'* conjures conflicting images of a child, and then a soldier, within a socio-cultural context where people are not comfortable using it, may sow seeds of resentment. This is especially true if those using the concept are outsiders who happen to be many in conflict ridden societies like northern Uganda, and particularly working with international organisations.

Implications for intervention

The use of language and concepts might influence the nature and design of intervention programmes. If one is planning programmes for a former child soldier, it might mean that the philosophy behind such a programme, or the priority of focus is the *'soldiering'* past of the beneficiaries and as a result might focus on demobilisation or traditional security related activities. In contrast, planning a programme for war affected and formerly abducted children might focus on rebuilding lost childhood and creating opportunities for building the future. Provision of support services might include a focus on educational services, creation of psychosocial support, social safety nets and the development of the general social services needed within the community where such formerly abducted children return. Having rejected the reference to soldiering, the formerly abducted children and their communities in northern Uganda might, therefore, be choosing, through their use of language, a community wide social safety net focused intervention, as opposed to a security focused one.

The inclusive use of language and reference to formerly abducted children, such as *'our children'*, also has implications for the target of intervention programmes. If a community does not isolate their formerly abducted children in terms of language use and relationships, it would be almost unacceptable for international

organisations to come into their community to provide assistance only to 'child soldiers' due to their experience in captivity, while all children and the community have been affected by war, but differently. Provision of assistance to 'former child soldiers' only identifies and further isolates and stigmatises, in lieu of such assistance. It is, therefore, in the best interest of all parties to be aware of these definitions and perceptions of local populations of war related social problems concerning children.

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¹ For full report and details of methodology see Angucia, M. (2010). *Broken Citizenship: Formerly Abducted Children and their Social Reintegration in Northern Uganda*, Rozenberg Publishers.

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