



## **Education in post conflict northern Uganda**

**By Wanja Munaita**

*A significant proportion of the 132 million children out-of-school worldwide live in countries affected by war and natural disaster. Education restores routine and gives people hope for the future; it can also serve as a channel both for meeting other basic humanitarian needs and communicating vital messages that promote safety and wellbeing<sup>1</sup>.*

Gaining an education should be as easy as 123 given that it is a standard human development requirement and a right. However, for millions of children in developing countries, this vital opportunity is out of reach. Millions are born into poverty cycles, and they are powerless to change that in their tender age. Others are orphaned and left to fend for their siblings, meaning the opportunity to attend school is pushed back by the first need to be a child-head of household. For thousands of girls, traditions override their right to education and many have been married off before the chance to finish their education and curve a future for themselves. All these reasons are compounded by conflict. Countries that have been in protracted conflict often have social services interrupted including schools and health facilities. In most of these countries, the education systems are weak even before conflict breaks out making re-establishing of schools and education routines following conflict very difficult.

For 23 years, several districts in northern Uganda were affected by conflict between the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) and the government of Uganda forces. This conflict forced about 1.8 million to flee into what was known as protected villages. Not unlike many conflicts on the continent of Africa, the rebel forces conscripted at least 30,000 children<sup>2</sup> forcing them into fighting. As young as 9 years old, these children were forced to kill their family members, watch their parents get killed or their mothers and sisters get raped. For girls who were conscripted, they became wives, porters and cooks living in hiding. Many children in northern Uganda walked long distances to Gulu town where they hid from the rebels as they raided the villages and took more children. These children became known as night commuters and at least 40,000<sup>3</sup> each night run to safety. Eventually, many abandoned their lives and ran for protection to the camps (protected villages) without knowing how long they would be there. Days turned to months and then turned to years: 23 years in total.

The children who managed to safely get into the camps had limited chances to continue their education. The LRA majorly threatened any peaceful living and they

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/themes/pcpd/education-in-emergencies/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/photos/2005/uganda/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

attacked education and health facilities and villages at will. As the conflict lasted two decades, many children were born in the camps. These children lost the chance to obtain a normal education like their counterparts in peaceful countries. Theirs were days of handouts from local and international agencies operating in emergencies. Education was not among the services provided as emergencies seek to address immediate basic needs; food, shelter and basic healthcare. Children born in encampment also lost the opportunity to learn from their elders, which is an important part in many African settings.

Once peace returned in 2006, the government of Uganda and the international community began to rebuild livelihoods and normalize as much as possible what had been lost. From reconstructing educational facilities, hospitals, water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, agriculture, governance structures, roads and then the most important, humans who had undergone tremendous trauma through the conflict.

The following paragraphs present the work of ZOA Uganda in restoring education in three districts of northern Uganda. ZOA is a Dutch NGO, which started in South-East Asia helping Vietnamese refugees during the Vietnamese war in 1973. Since 2007, ZOA has been in Pader and Agago districts working on strengthening the quality and delivery of primary education. Through the construction of community schools where needed, ZOA seeks to augment the capacity of governmental primary schools by constructing community schools in remote areas of northern Uganda. ZOA's education projects seek to ensure that school infrastructures such as the Parents Teachers Committees (PTAs) and School Management Committees (SMCs) are active while engaging with local authorities to lobby for community schools to be included in the public school system. Community schools do not receive any funding support or trained teachers from the government. Community schools also lack access to 'approved' public examinations, which means students attending community schools experience a unique challenge once they get to the last year of studies. Students in community schools must find where to sit for the approved examinations, which then enables them to proceed to the next step of their education. In this regard, ZOA works to bridge the gap and ensure students are able to sit for the final examinations that determine entry into secondary school.

The children who are currently of school age in northern Uganda are those whose parents endured more than a decade in encampment. During this time, it was impossible to pursue an education and continue normal lives. There are many aspects of a day-day life that are affected during conflict. Psychological factors, emotional, spiritual, and physical, not to mention the damage to economies that comes with conflict. For many school-aged children, the struggle to keep up with the rest of Uganda even though they are not in a 'level playing ground' is real. Teachers have often gained salaries and left the teaching profession to do business, which is more enticing economically.

There is a deep need to advocate for stronger support for education in countries recovering from conflict in order to ensure children eventually have the opportunity

to live a normal life if only as adults who with hope, shall build better opportunities for others in these countries.

***About the author***

*Wanja Munaita is currently working for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Nairobi, Kenya on statelessness issues. Previously, Wanja worked for ZOA Uganda as Program Support Officer with specific emphasis on capacity development for local members of staff and partners of ZOA. Wanja is passionate about education, governance and human rights issues specifically in the continent where she was born and raised. Wanja believes in the possibility of change through a change in attitudes. Wanja has lived, studied and worked in several countries in Northern Europe and is based in Victoria, Canada.*