

CECORE TRANSFORMS YOUTH FROM

By Wangah Wanyama

Centre for Conflict Resolution (CECORE) is implementing the "Youth Peace Champions Project - Phase III in selected post-conflict communities in Uganda. The project aims at preventing re-radicalisation - in a bid to prevent the targeted youth from sliding back into acts of violence. The project's main target is youth who have previously been involved in (armed) violence. It also supports youth groups who are engaged in peace-building. The project has two main interventions - peace building, and "connectors for peace"/income generating projects.

Funded by the German Federal Foreign Office through ifa-zivik, the project in 2023 is being implemented in three selected districts - Kasese in south western Uganda, Kaabong in Karamoja region - north eastern Uganda, and Amuru in northern Uganda. These youth who become change agents in their communities, lead in transforming the attitudes of their peers in the community and are referred to as "Peace Champions".

KEY ACTIVITIES

Some of the key activities under the 2023 project include: Baseline study, training in peace-building and conflict transformation, skills training in "connectors for peace"/income generating activities, training in trauma healing and Gender-Based Violence (GBV), and training in climate change and conflict nexus. Others include provision of supplementary materials for "connectors for peace" initiatives, community awareness raising and dialogues, talent support, mentoring and market linkages, experience sharing meetings, monitoring and evaluation and closing events.

The project builds on similar previous projects in 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022 in the districts of Kaabong, Kotido and Amudat in Karamoja region (north eastern Uganda), Kasese (south western Uganda), Yumbe (West Nile region) and Lira (northern Uganda).

Patrick Bwire, the project's coordinator notes that the projects are implemented in an inclusive and active participatory manner with active participation of youth and other actors

like community members, community leaders, local government leaders, CSOs, project alumni, existing community infrastructures for peace, etc - applying a "whole of society" approach. He adds that the project places the youth and community leaders at the centre of decision making - identifying the "what" that needs to be done and "how" it should be done.

HOW CECORE IS ADDRESSING RE-RADICALISATION AND BUILDING PEACE IN COMMUNITIES

This is done in three stages. The first stage is to build the capacity of the Youth Peace Champions in peace-building and conflict transformation, trauma healing, management and reconciliation, income generation, and addressing negative effects arising from climate change and conflict nexus. The peace champions become the change agents in their communities by transforming the lives of fellow former warriors/ combatants/child soldiers. Secondly, the project supports the Youth Peace Champions to engage in peace-building sensitisation and awareness.

Thirdly, the project equips the youth with practical skills and equipment for enhancing "connectors for peace" initiatives that provide key alternatives to gun-violence, transform mindset, provide employment and keep youth busy, promote unity and co-existence and sustains healthy relationships.

PEACE IN KARAMOJA

Karamoja region has had a long and complex history of gun violence - escalated by cattle theft and raiding within and with neighbouring pastoral communities in Kenya and South Sudan. The region has experienced a vicious cycle of violence with presence and proliferation of illicit guns as one of the key fuelling factors. The region has for long been characterised by cases of illicit gun possession, brutal killings, injuries, and cattle raids, theft of livestock, revenge attacks, abductions, road ambushes, rape, and border disputes, among others. In 2023, the project has focused its interventions in hot-spot areas in Kaabong district.

The project is working with the peace champions and alumni to facilitate joint community engagements between the security actors,



CECORE Executive Director (centre) with some of the peace champions - Kaabong

authorities, community and reaching out to warriors - as a way of fostering peace. The project has played a key role in contributing to voluntary disarmament and resultant relative peace in the district.

KAABONG

"We have focused on 'mental disarmament' to enable the warriors first appreciate the dangers of illicit guns and the good that comes along when we say no to gun violence," Bwire says.

Simon Katol was one of the known criminals/armed cattle raiders in Kaabong. He joined the vice at 14 years after being convinced by his peers to engage in road ambushes and stealing of cows from neighbouring communities. He stayed in the bush engaging in cattle raids within Karamoja and across the border in Turkana-Kenya. In 2022, he came in contact with a buffalo in the bush that seriously injured him, but could not access medical services because of fear of being sighted by the army. He is among the former warriors who have been convinced by the "Peace Champions" and handed in their guns and is set to receive amnesty certificates from the government.

"I feel I am now a free person and I thank the Youth Peace Champions for saving my life. I am now mobilising my fellow colleagues to stop gun-violence and embrace peace," he says.

John Bosco Loiki, a former notorious warrior from Kakamar sub-county, who is now a champion of peace has this to say: "I was a very bad boy, so scaring that when people would meet me and my group they would take off for their lives. I would rob, kill and raid in broad day-light. I did a lot of bad things which I think of and regret. When I attended CECORE's trainings in peace-building and trauma healing, I started changing. I then surrendered the gun to government, and I have since brought many of my colleagues from the bush who also brought back the guns. We are now champions of peace

FOCUS ON KASESE

Kasese is one of the post-conflict and conflict prone districts in Uganda. The 2016 incidences when the Rwenzururu kingdom clashed with Uganda Peoples' Defense Forces is one of the incidences. During that time, Government security forces accused some of the youth in the region of being a militia - referred to them as *Kirumira-mutima* (resemblance of suicide bombers), who attacked the military installations in Kasese. The military forces responded by attacking the palace of the cultural leader Omusinga Charles Wesley Mumbere and over 100 people allegedly died during the violent conflict.



During a tree planting exercise in Kasese

FUNDED BY THE GERMAN FEDERAL FOREIGN OFFICE THROUGH IFA-ZIVIK, THE PROJECT IN 2023 IS BEING IMPLEMENTED IN KASESE, KAABONG AND AMURU

Many of the youth and the royal guards of the kingdom and the king himself were arrested - until recently.

While, the former royal guards have since been released, many of them are still facing challenges of settling back into livelihoods, deal with stigma, trauma and fear - amidst the lack of rehabilitation programmes for such people.

Bwambale - One of the peace champions in Kasese, is one of the youth who were arrested following the 2016 insurgency in Kasese.

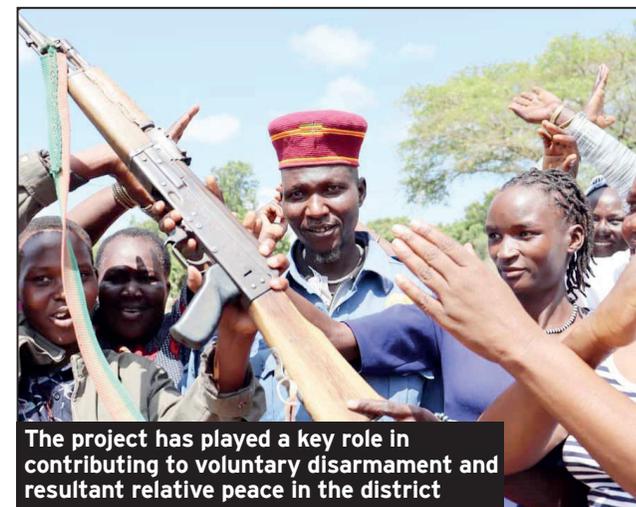
Many of his colleagues were arrested too. He spent over four years in prison before being released on bail. He says the incidences of the insurgency were so traumatising and some of his family members were killed.

"To make matters worse, about two months after my release, my house and other property were swept away by the River Nyamwamba floods," he says. This added to the complexity of trauma. Bwambale is one of the

VIOLENCE TO CHAMPIONS OF PEACE



Some of the LRA survivors - now peace champions in Amuru



The project has played a key role in contributing to voluntary disarmament and resultant relative peace in the district



Peace champions with their organic sunflower oil processing plant in Kaabong

THE ROLE OF CECORE

Many Ugandans, like the Youth Peace Champions, have benefited from the capacity building skills provided by CECORE, a Non-Governmental Organisation founded in 1995. CECORE's main purpose is to empower individuals, women and men, communities, organisations and institutions to transform conflict effectively by applying alternative means of resolving conflicts - in order to promote a culture of peace. Rose Othieno, the Executive Director of CECORE explained that at the time when they started running the organisation in 1995, few NGOs were involved in peace and conflict resolution, if any. "We realised this was the time to give people skills, so that they were able to understand conflict and effectively resolve their conflicts," she notes.

training, I felt relieved of the heavy pain and anger I have been carrying in my heart. There are so many formerly abducted girls who are still having the pain I used to have before this training. I will work with my fellow peace champion group to ensure we reach out to them," Adoch says. CECORE has also worked in Yumbe district in West Nile - with groups like the former child soldiers under the defunct UNRF II rebel group.

INCOME GENERATING INITIATIVES

To sustain the peace building efforts, CECORE creatively integrates "connectors for peace" activities into its interventions. Bwire says, this partly responds to real needs on the ground where youth would remark "peace is good, but we can't eat peace".

He adds that these are income generating activities, but implemented with a peace-building lens. In addition to purely

peace-building activities, youth groups are supported with tailored equipment to enhance youth income generating initiatives. Some of the initiatives include carpentry and joinery, tailoring, sunflower oil processing, piggery goat rearing, grinding mills, craft work, liquid soap making, among others. The initiatives not only bring incomes in the pockets of the youth, but also offer opportunities for employment, reducing idleness, and promoting co-existence and unity.

"This has motivated me also to start my own business - a retail shop that brings me some income to manage my family needs. This creates peace in me and my community and people are copying what I am doing," Beatrice Kelly, from Elegu says.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND CONFLICT NEXUS CHALLENGE

The communities remain susceptible and with high

vulnerability to the effects of climate change - and yet the adaptive/resilience capacity is low. Climate change and its related stress on community livelihood is one of the key drivers of conflict in the region. There is an increasing correlation between climate change and insecurity and vice versa - as each amplifies the other. Districts like Kasese, Amuru and Kaabong face extreme effects of climate change such as mudslides, flooding, severe drought, etc.

To ensure sustainable peace, CECORE has integrated climate change in its peace building projects. The interventions have included trainings, community sensitisations, tree planting, etc.

GBV, PREVENTION AND REFERRAL PATHWAYS

GBV remains a key driver of violence at family and community level. This is worse in post-conflict and conflict prone environments. It is mainly seen through manifestations like fights among couples, family breakdown, disunity among family members and acts of structural injustices. Through its "Prevention, Response and Referral, Pathways" approach, the project has worked with the Peace Champions and relevant institutions to contribute towards addressing prevalent GBV cases.

"In this area of Elegu, there was a very high rate of GBV. We used to sleep as early as 6:00pm because of fear. There were rampant cases of rape, theft, killings. But at least nowadays things have changed because of the community

sensitisation going on by the peace champions. Town Council says.

TALENT SUPPORT

One of the most effective ways of community sensitisation has been talent support. This has not only empowered and lifted the talents of the youth, but has also been an instrumental channel of communicating peace messages. Talent support has included composing and production of songs, football for peace, forum theatre, among others.

MODEL FOR SUCCESS

The project has realised great success in the lives of individual youths groups and communities. The interventions have contributed to voluntary disarmament in Kaabong district as well as Karamoja region, made girls and women who used to influence armed raids in Karamoja to convince warriors to abandon the vice, returned youth from hideouts in Kasese, reduced cases of trauma, GBV and re-radicalisation in northern Uganda, among others. Othieno, says the project is now referred to as a model best practice for transforming the lives of youth - especially in conflict and post-conflict contexts and that the learnings from the project have made other actors to initiate similar projects in other countries. "Many of us who used to be looked at as perpetrators have transformed from champions of violence to 'champions of peace' and we are trusted as agents of peace in our communities," - one of the peace champions in Kakamar sub-county, in Kaabong says.

participants who broke down in tears while presenting his "River of my life" story - during a training in trauma healing. "But, I am grateful for the skills and restoration of hope the trauma healing training has brought into my life. I am engaging many of my colleagues to overcome trauma".

DEALING WITH TRAUMA

Uganda continues to face multiple and violent interlinked conflicts and post-conflict challenges.

Northern Uganda, the region that for over two decades had one of the long-lasting civil wars is one of the examples. The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebel groups and its leader Joseph Kony caused tremendous suffering to the people of especially northern Uganda, leading to a displacement of over 1.5 million people, abduction of thousands of

children and death of tens of thousands. Many survivors' memories are still fresh in their minds. But the process of healing is being felt.

Jeff Ouma, abducted as a child and forced to kill, says, "After coming back from the bush, I started experiencing nightmares and would be disturbed by evil spirits. After receiving counselling from the peace champions of Light Bridge, I have experienced healing."

On the other hand, Jessica Adoch was abducted at 10 together with her brother. She and her colleague aged 12 were given as wives to one of the top LRA rebel commanders. They, like others were indoctrinated into violence and cause and witnessed a lot of traumatic experiences.

"Life upon return was equally frustrating with lots of rejection. But I am glad that at the end of the