

Forgotten Voices After War: A Secondary Evidence Synthesis of Survivor Experiences, Transitional Justice, and Social Reintegration in Northern Uganda

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ABSTRACT

The impact of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) war is still being felt by the marginalized survivors of the conflict even after the end of the war in Northern Uganda. This paper looks at the experiences of formerly abducted individuals, formerly abducted women and mothers, children born in captivity and other survivors with regards to psychological distress, stigmatization, family issues, identification, land, livelihoods, social exclusion and transitional justice. Using an evidence synthesis approach, the paper synthesizes findings from surveys, longitudinal and qualitative studies, survivor research and policy documents. The results show that reintegration does not only entail physical and familial reunification. The victims have continued to suffer psychological distress, socio-economic uncertainty, gender-specific marginalization, stigmatization and issues relating to belonging, family and land. The paper shows a gap between the official transitional justice process and the everyday concerns of the survivors including psychosocial well-being, recovery of livelihoods, social acceptance and participation. Sustainable peace involves survivor centered transitional justice that combines accountability and truth telling with reparations, psychosocial healing, community reconciliation and socio-economic empowerment. The paper suggests that post-conflict recovery should be measured not just through the lack of violence but also through the dignity, inclusivity, well-being, security and participation of survivors in community life.

KEYWORDS: Transitional Justice, Reintegration, Survivor-Centered Justice, Psychosocial Recovery.

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INTRODUCTION

The war between the Uganda government and Lord's Resistance Army is one of the most enduring cases of armed conflict in contemporary Uganda. This war started around the late 1980s and lasted for two decades with various abuses against civilians such as abductions, recruitment, murder, sexual abuse, torture, destruction of property, separation from families, and displacement. In a study conducted amongst the people affected by the war, it was observed that there were many cases of war experiences and the affected community showed great concern about peace and justice (Pham et al., 2005; Vinck et al., 2007). The war also caused the kidnapping of many thousands of children, who were then forced to serve in the LRA as combatants, porters, domestic servants, or "wives" of the commanders (Allen et al., 2020).

While the absence of large-scale armed hostilities after the 2006 Juba Peace Talks has generated a significant potential for reconstruction, return, reconciliation, and recovery, the absence of armed hostilities has not implied the absence of the impact of the conflict-related trauma. On the contrary, many victims of the civil war have been forced to cope with a number of post-conflict stresses that include psychological problems, poverty, social marginalization, broken family ties, uncertain future, and unresolved issues regarding justice and identity. Evidence about former child-soldiers suggests that the effects of war trauma continue to influence psychological well-being even long after the return from combat and the post-war stress is one of the important mechanisms of continuation of psychological problems (Amone-P'Olak et al., 2014a, 2014b). This is especially significant for Formerly Abducted Persons (FAPs). Previous reintegration activities tended to focus on reception, demobilization, family tracing, and repatriation. But longitudinal studies show that the difficulties associated with reintegration do not dissipate when former abducted persons are successfully brought back to their families. Allen et al. (2020), using findings gathered over many years, found

Forgotten Voices After War: A Secondary Evidence Synthesis of Survivor Experiences, Transitional Justice, and Social Reintegration in Northern Uganda

that the paths of those children who came back from the LRA were complicated and that expectations of success based on family reunification were not always fulfilled. Likewise, recent findings describe reintegration in Northern Uganda as an ongoing process rather than a result of demobilization (Kiefer, 2025).

The gender question is particularly important when discussing the disparities in reintegration processes. Girls and women who were kidnapped by the LRA became victims of multiple abuses, such as forced labor, rape, marriage and motherhood in captivity. Upon their return, some had to endure the stress of having to take care of children born while in captivity and at the same time try to gain acceptance into communities characterized by poverty and strict gender roles. According to recent findings, former girls and women who have been abducted, together with their children, face greater difficulties in reintegration processes than returning boys and men due to social norms related to sexuality, marriage, kinship and patrilineage in local communities (Kiefer, 2025). Previous research found that former abducted girls-mothers often returned as social outcasts and found it difficult to find social, economic and personal security (Newman, 2014).

It can be argued through the example of children born in captivity that the effects of the LRA conflict span generations. While these children may not have directly participated in the conflict, they would nevertheless be seen as associated with the LRA due to the fact that their mothers were abductees. According to Denov et al (2023), land and place hold special significance for those children born in LRA captivity because land and its connection to belongingness, identity, social acceptance, and economic security hold significance for the people. In this case, reintegration cannot simply be limited to the process of psychological adjustment and physical relocation but also citizenship, kinship, inheritance, and land rights.

The psychological aspects of recovery from war are just as crucial. Studies among the internally displaced population in Northern Uganda found high rates of PTSD and depression caused by exposure to conflict-related violence (Roberts et al., 2008; Vinck et al., 2007). More specifically, studies of former child soldiers found that exposure to death, loss of possessions, threat to close relations and sexual abuse may predict poor psychological functioning, while stigma, fear of family disruption and shortage of health care providers are the obstacles to seeking mental health assistance (Amone-P'Olak et al., 2014a). Long-term mental health is also affected by the post-war conditions, suggesting that intervention measures concentrating only on traumas and neglecting socio-economic and social stressors are not enough (Amone-P'Olak et al., 2014b).

These findings have significant implications to transitional justice. Transitional justice refers to the process in which societies engage in order to deal with the issues related to mass violence and human rights abuses, such as criminal accountability, truth-seeking, reparations, reforms, and reconciliation. In Uganda, some of the strategies employed include the prosecution of offenders, amnesties, traditional justice approaches, and the creation of a national framework for transitional justice. The National Transitional Justice Policy by the Government of Uganda aims at improving accountability, reconciliation, reintegration, and peacebuilding (Uganda Law Reform Commission). However, having a policy framework does not mean that survivors receive justice in their daily lives.

One of the issues in focus is the disconnect between the institutional approach to transitional justice and the priorities set out by the affected war populations. Previous research in Northern Uganda proved that the affected community held its own views on what peace, justice, accountability, and reconciliation are (Pham et al., 2005). Modern-day research corroborates this issue and proves that any process of reconciliation must be analyzed from the point of view of those individuals who were abductees and who have to reintegrate into society (Alipanga & Luberenga, 2024). The issue here is that, as a survivor, a person can see justice not only in legal terms but also in the form of recognition and social acceptance.

Limitations of the top-down approach have been pointed out in studies conducted on survivor organizations. Schulz & Ngomokwe (2021) for example, suggest that some of the interventions in terms of transitional justice and peacebuilding in post-conflict Uganda were externally driven, out of reach of the rural population, or simply ineffective in addressing the various needs following the conflict. On the other hand, the survivor organizations have provided platforms where the affected population can express themselves, gain agency, heal, and contribute to the process of transitional justice and peacebuilding from their local context. It means that involvement of survivors is not only a question of ethics but can also be a mechanism of success. There is evidence highlighting the fact that the difficulties faced by previously abducted women continue to be significant almost two decades after the cessation of hostilities. For instance, Anyeko (2025) highlights the fact that women who were victims of forced marriage during the period of war continue to struggle with various issues related to personal relationships, family, and overall wellbeing. This suggests that there is no automatic resolution of the social implications of the violence and forced marriages in times of war simply because time has passed.

"Forgotten Voices" is an especially apt concept in this context because it does not mean that survivors were actually forgotten by researchers and policymakers. Instead, the concept highlights those aspects of survival that might be neglected in mainstream national and international discourses on war, justice, and recovery. The attention is focused on the cases when high-profile trials are widely publicized, while other equally important, yet hidden aspects of survivors' experience such as stigma, insecure housing, mental trauma, ostracism from one's own family, poverty, and intergenerational identity are neglected.

Forgotten Voices After War: A Secondary Evidence Synthesis of Survivor Experiences, Transitional Justice, and Social Reintegration in Northern Uganda

In that regard, this research paper highlights the lived experiences of people affected by conflict as the main point of analysis. In particular, the paper considers formerly abducted people, former abducted mothers, children born in captivity, and orphans. This is because the experiences of such people demonstrate the interconnection between trauma, marginalization, lack of economic security, and transitional justice. The research paper claims that there must be a move from an institution-centered to a survivor-centered approach for sustainable peace.

The paper makes three contributions to the scholarly discourse on the issue in question. Firstly, it integrates the psychological, sociological, economic, gendered, and intergenerational aspects of reintegration after the war. Secondly, it explores the connection between these experiences and the process of designing and implementing transitional justice. Finally, it finds survivor involvement, community-based reconciliation, psychosocial support, and socioeconomic empowerment as integral elements of sustainable recovery. The paper addresses the persisting problem of the need to take into account the experiences of those who were most directly impacted by the LRA conflict in Northern Uganda.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In excess of two decades since the cessation of large-scale fighting in Northern Uganda, the social, psychological, and socioeconomic effects of the war still persist. While efforts have been made in relation to peacebuilding, reconstruction, accountability, and transitional justice, many of those affected continue to grapple with issues that are not being sufficiently addressed through post-conflict mechanisms. These issues are particularly relevant to former abductees, former abductee women and mothers, children born in captivity, and others who continue to be defined by their experiences of conflict. The problem extends beyond the persistence of trauma. Formerly abducted persons experience continuing stigma, social rejection, poverty, disrupted family relationships, unemployment, and limited access to psychosocial services. Research indicates that the post-war environment itself contributes substantially to continuing mental health problems among former child soldiers (Amone-P'Olak et al., 2014b). At the same time, barriers to mental health care include stigma, fear of family disruption, and inadequate availability of trained health workers (Amone-P'Olak et al., 2014a). Consequently, psychological recovery cannot be separated from the social and material conditions in which survivors attempt to rebuild their lives. It becomes more complicated for women who have been forcibly abducted and raped or married to strangers. After coming back, these women could be under pressure regarding such aspects of life as marriage, sexuality, motherhood, and being part of the family, which might affect their reintegration process. According to recent research, gender still affects reintegration results in the long term, and women and children who have been released from captivity often find reintegration harder than men (Kiefer, 2025). At the same time, studies of women who were forced to marry during wartime show that even their lives after the war are not easy (Anyeko, 2025). The children born while in captivity constitute yet another relatively marginalized group of people. Despite the fact that such children have not been involved in any fighting, their social identity will still be shaped according to how their mother was abducted and her association with LRA. The research conducted on children born in the captivity of the LRA has shown that discrimination, poverty, identity issues, and availability of land have a strong impact on their integration (Denov et al., 2023).

In terms of transitional justice, the issue of disconnect between institutional processes and the priorities of survivors arises. Uganda has put in place a national policy structure meant to foster accountability, reconciliation, social integration, and peace. But there are indications that some transitional justice and peace-building interventions have tended to be imposed from above and by outsiders and have not adequately taken into account the varied experiences and concerns of rural survivors (Schulz & Ngomokwe, 2021). The current study of reconciliation programmes also highlights the need to understand reconciliation through the lens of the formerly abducted persons and their communities (Alipanga & Luberega, 2024). Such disjuncture poses an enormous threat of invisibilization wherein the survivors would be formally recognized as victims but would not have been adequately listened to regarding the issue of justice, compensation, reconciliation, mental well-being, land, education, livelihood, and social reintegration. The very relevance of the survivor support groups proves that the people affected by the conflict know enough for contributing to the peace process once given the appropriate opportunity (Schulz & Ngomokwe, 2021).

Thus, the main issue that this paper seeks to address is the constant mismatch between the experiences and concerns of conflict survivors of the war and the approaches that have been adopted in transitional justice and post-conflict reintegration. Although formal procedures can lead to accountability and reconciliation, they will not be sufficient in solving the various challenges that come about as a result of conflicts, whether socially, psychologically, economically, through gender issues, and even intergenerational. The reason why this problem should be addressed is that sustainable peace goes beyond the mere absence of armed conflicts. There is need to bring back dignity, sense of belonging, psychological wellbeing, economic security, family ties, and participation in both community and national processes. Otherwise, if the views of the marginalized conflict survivors are excluded from transitional justice and recovery processes, then post-conflict peace will be institutional and absent among survivors.

Forgotten Voices After War: A Secondary Evidence Synthesis of Survivor Experiences, Transitional Justice, and Social Reintegration in Northern Uganda

OBJECTIVES

The overall aim is to explore the experiences of marginalized survivors of the LRA conflict in Northern Uganda and evaluate whether the process of transitional justice and post-conflict interventions meets their psychosocial and socio-economic needs.

The specific objectives are:

1. to examine the lived experiences and post-conflict challenges of formerly abducted persons, formerly abducted women and mothers, children born in captivity, and other marginalized conflict survivors in Northern Uganda, with particular attention to stigma, psychological distress, family relationships, identity, land, and socioeconomic marginalization.
2. to assess the extent to which transitional justice, reconciliation, and social reintegration mechanisms in Northern Uganda respond to the priorities and lived realities of conflict survivors, particularly their needs for psychosocial support, livelihood recovery, education, land and family-related support, recognition, justice, and social acceptance.
3. To explore survivor-centered approaches for strengthening restorative justice, social reintegration, and sustainable peace in Northern Uganda, including survivor participation, truth-telling, community reconciliation, psychosocial recovery, socioeconomic empowerment, and locally grounded mechanisms of healing and justice.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Literature related to post-conflict Northern Uganda has been shifting from focus on the extent of wartime violence and repatriation of formerly abducted individuals to interest in reintegration, psychosocial well-being, gender, identity, land issues, belonging, reconciliation, and transitional justice. The first population-based research helped estimate the extent of exposure to violence and displacement as well as define the main needs of the affected populations in terms of peace and justice (Pham et al., 2005; Vinck et al., 2007). Later longitudinal and qualitative studies showed effects of the conflict even after the end of the war, and reintegration processes depended on various social, economic, cultural, and psychological factors (Allen et al., 2020; Amone-P'Olak et al., 2014a, 2014b). More recent scholarship has contested the negative depictions of former abductees. Specifically, studies focusing on girls and young women have advocated for gender-sensitive approaches and an asset approach that acknowledges the strengths of survivors as opposed to their vulnerability and damage (Savard & Michaelsen, 2021). Likewise, scholarship on children born into captivity has shown that issues of belonging, land, family, and identity are important to post-conflict reconstruction efforts (Denov et al., 2023; Atim et al., 2023).

The current review is based on the objectives of this research paper. First, the review looks at the experiences of the survivors and challenges that face them after the conflict. Second, it looks at how these experiences link with issues of transitional justice, reconciliation, and reintegration. Third, it looks at survivor-focused ways of improving restorative justice and reintegration.

LIVED EXPERIENCES AND POST-CONFLICT CHALLENGES OF MARGINALIZED SURVIVORS

The literature shows that although the formerly abducted people from the LRA may have returned to their families, it does not guarantee a successful reintegration process for these individuals. During the conflict, the children and youths were abducting and integrated within the LRA as a result of coercion and were subject to violence, forced labor, military training, and many other abuses. Many of these individuals returned to their communities with the help of reception centers and family tracing programs. However, according to Allen et al. (2020), the long-term paths of these individuals were much more complex. Allen et al. (2020) tracked the former LRA recruits for an extended period of time and noted that it was erroneous to believe that automatic reintegration would result from the reception of returnees, their family reunification, and the return to their communities. This point is especially important, since it focuses our attention on the social context in which reintegration takes place, rather than the mere return of former abductees.

Reintegration thus appears as an ongoing process of building one's life through family ties, social inclusion, economic possibilities, identity, and services. Among the recent works, that of Kiefer (2025) is especially valuable since he shows how reintegration in Northern Uganda is defined by sexuality, gender roles, marriage, and patrilineage. This evidence indicates that there is no correlation between physical presence and social integration. An individual may be physically part of the community but remain socially excluded from his/her family, marital relations, means of livelihood, or participation in decisions within the community. As such, social reintegration must include objective factors like employment, education, housing, and family reunification, as well as subjective factors.

The issue of stigma is one of the toughest obstacles to reintegration. Persons previously abducted can come back with an identity that is inconsistent with what the community sees as a victim. Individuals might be labeled as "rebels," collaborators, offenders, or individuals with undesirable behaviors resulting from being in captivity. This creates an awkward social situation where those returning are simultaneously victims of violence and offenders. The impact of social rejection is critical since in many Northern Ugandan communities, identity is relational. Social belonging is linked to relations of kinship, family, land ownership, marriage, and social obligations. When the previous abductees are seen as outsiders, their capacity to form an identity becomes limited. Social

Forgotten Voices After War: A Secondary Evidence Synthesis of Survivor Experiences, Transitional Justice, and Social Reintegration in Northern Uganda

Identity Theory of Tajfel and Turner (1979) offers a framework to help explain the phenomenon. People get part of their identity from their association with social groups, and there is differential treatment because of in-group and out-group differentiation. In Northern Uganda, the names given to people regarding kidnapping, rebellion, or imprisonment can lead to being viewed as an outsider. This theory, therefore, becomes helpful in trying to understand the maintenance of wartime identities even when there is no more war. However, a solely stigma-centered analysis would lead to seeing the survivors merely as passive receivers of the attitudes of the community towards them. The most recent body of literature highlights the agency and resilience of the survivors. According to Savard and Michaelsen (2021), a scoping review conducted by them revealed that the body of literature on former abductees is largely based on a deficit framework, and less literature is available on resilience and agency. This point is especially significant for the idea of “the forgotten voices.” In the case of survivor-oriented analysis, one needs to go further than just questioning what happened to the victims; one needs to ask about their interpretation of their experiences, identity negotiation, livelihoods, solidarity, and community reconstruction.

The aspect of gender plays a big part in the impact of captivity and liberation. In this case, girls captured by the LRA were tasked with the responsibilities of being porters, domestics, soldiers, and sex slaves or ‘wives’ of commanders. Most came back with children born in captivity. This posed new challenges that were unique to women. However, as Newman (2014) observed, child mothers previously abducted had faced considerable challenges in the reconstruction of their lives post-return. These included challenges related to parenting, social acceptance, lack of economic security, and the challenge of constructing identity in a complex combination of being child, being mother, having been abducted, and raped during the war period. Savard & Michaelsen (2021) highlight the importance of a balanced perspective that takes into account both the harm and the agency of the formerly abducted girls and young women in the existing literature and programming on the topic. It is essential due to the fact that women who were previously associated with the armed groups are not only victims who need to be protected but also social actors. More recent studies by Kiefer (2025) have shown that the successful reintegration of formerly abducted women is closely related to gendered attitudes toward sexual relations, marriage, and patrilineality. This suggests that gender-sensitive reintegration cannot be limited only to the provision of aid but should include consideration of the social structures that either accept or reject women. Thus, any discussion of formerly abducted women should take into account the interrelation between gender, maternity, stigma, marginality, and war trauma. Among those affected by war and who continue to face challenges even after peace is achieved is the generation of children born during LRA captivity. While these children did not themselves fight in the war, it is possible to pinpoint them through their mother's experiences and their connection with ex-combatants of the LRA. In their study of children born during LRA captivity, Denov et al. (2023) argue that land and place are extremely important in the post-conflict life of these children. In addition to being an economic resource, land represents family identity, inclusion, belonging, inheritance, and security. Children born in LRA captivity may therefore suffer from exclusion not only due to interpersonal stigmatization but also in establishing their legitimate claims to family land and ancestral lands. In a similar fashion, Atim et al. (2023) explain that children of war are likely to feel uncertain about their kinship relations and belonging. Such children may suffer from identity crises due to uncertainties about biological father, family ties, community acceptance, and circumstances of birth. These two studies contribute to the concept of transitional justice by showing that even those who do not directly suffer from violence still require justice in post-conflict period.

Similarly, psychological distress is an important aspect of post-conflict experiences in Northern Uganda. In previous research, high levels of PTSD and depression among internally displaced individuals exposed to war violence have been noted (Roberts et al., 2008). Longitudinal research on former child soldiers showed that the mental state is affected not only by war experiences but also by post-war environments. Amone-P'Olak et al. (2014b) reported that both war and post-war environments contribute to the development of mental health disorders in former child soldiers. The findings are critical to planning post-conflict programs because the approach to psychological distress cannot be limited to treating memories of wartime violence without considering issues related to poverty, social exclusion, insecurity, and lack of services. Amone-P'Olak et al. (2014a) also revealed barriers to treatment for former child soldiers, such as stigma, family relationship problems, and lack of health professionals. The studies highlight the connection between mental health and social reintegration. As a result, literature evidence suggests a holistic perspective on the wellbeing of survivors. Psychological recovery should include not only counseling and clinical treatment but also social integration, economic stability, acceptance in the family, and agency. The idea is in line with the ecological concept of resilience where individual wellbeing is determined by social environments' availability and accessibility fruitful transitional justice (Ungar, 2011).

TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE, RECONCILIATION, AND SOCIAL REINTEGRATION

Transitional justice is about the means adopted by societies to deal with the legacy of massive human rights violations after a period of conflict or autocratic governance. Teitel (2000) defines transitional justice as a particular type of justice characterized by periods of transition within politics and society. Methods employed in transitional justice can comprise of criminal prosecution, truth-seeking, reparations, institution-building, and other measures to deal with abuses of the past. The case of Uganda provides an illustration of how formal justice and local transitional justice are at odds with each other. The National Transitional Justice Policy

Forgotten Voices After War: A Secondary Evidence Synthesis of Survivor Experiences, Transitional Justice, and Social Reintegration in Northern Uganda

of the Government of Uganda was formulated as an all-encompassing strategy addressing accountability, reconciliation, reintegration, and peacebuilding. It acknowledges the role of formal justice, traditional justice, reconciliation, and reparations as elements of transitional justice. However, just because there are formal mechanisms for addressing the problem of past wrongdoings does not mean that survivors are assured access to justice. Transitional justice becomes out of touch with people's everyday life when there is a focus on legal accountability in institutional settings while the priorities of survivors lie in material recovery, family reconciliation, social recognition, mental healing, land and livelihood. It was shown by Pham et al. (2005) that Northern Uganda communities had different understanding of peace and justice. This is still important because it proves that justice does not have a universal meaning.

One of the recurring issues in the literature concerns the disconnect between externally crafted transitional justice tools and the reality faced by rural communities. Schulz and Ngomokwe (2021) note that post-conflict transitional justice and peace-building initiatives in Uganda have largely been top-down, external, inaccessible to rural people, and inadequate in response to varied needs after conflict. The significance of the above idea to the current paper is in offering an explanation of why survivor stories are “invisibilized.” As long as such interventions are created mostly by governments, international organizations, or professionals, then survivors will become the subjects of intervention rather than participants in shaping their understanding of justice and recovery. The issue cannot be resolved through the increased number of transitional justice programs. The only thing that matters in terms of efficacy is whether the interventions are tailored to local needs and allow for participation. As such, reconciliation cannot be realized. Reconciliation is especially vital in Northern Uganda owing to the fact that most of the victims and perpetrators of violence will have to continue living together in the same community. While the typical criminal justice system focuses primarily on punishing offenders, reconciliation places much emphasis on healing social relations and ensuring that the community continues to live together after the occurrence of violence. Recently, Alipanga and Lubereenga (2024) conducted research on reconciliation initiatives based on the perspective of individuals affected by war in Northern Uganda. This research is notable in that it moves away from the traditional analytical lens that focuses on the design of the initiative towards the experiences of war and the reintegration process by the victims of war. This new lens is essential since we cannot take reconciliation for granted in the sense that it will automatically be achieved through engagement in these initiatives. It can be forgiveness, truth-telling, social acceptance, restoration of family relations, or coexistence without forgiveness. Only then can the idea of transitional justice and restorative approaches make sense to the survivors.

There has been quite some interest in traditional and community-based justice models in northern Uganda too. These models usually are linked with restorative justice more than merely with punitive justice. The main strength of such models is the capacity to solve community relations in ways which may be beyond the capacity of formal justice mechanisms. On the other hand, traditional justice cannot be idealized, as it might be embedded in gendered and hierarchical social order, and, hence, may lack the capacity to tackle some types of violence, especially sexual violence. For this reason, it makes sense to use a complementarity model and not an exclusive model in addressing harms done to people. Social reintegration is being discussed increasingly in the literature as multi-dimensional in nature. This includes not only the restoration of relationships, economic activity, family membership, psychological well-being, identity, but also community membership. Allen et al. (2020) highlight the need for reintegration programs to consider the post-return phase in their assessment as well, rather than only the immediate one following the return from conflict zones. Kiefer (2025) goes on to show how even after the completion of any reintegration program, reintegration remains affected by gender, sexuality, marriage, and patriarchy. There is thus a challenge to all those programmatic frameworks which see reintegration as an end-point in itself.

SURVIVOR-CENTERED APPROACHES, RESTORATIVE JUSTICE, AND SUSTAINABLE PEACE

One significant development in current literature has been the move from the victim-centered to the survivor-centered paradigm. Victim-centered focuses on the negative impacts on the victims while the survivor-centered approach further acknowledges the capacity, resilience, and participation of the survivors. The work of Schulz and Ngomokwe (2021) provides a valuable insight into the participatory aspect of survivors' groups in the post-conflict era in Uganda. The authors suggest that survivor groups could become key actors in the areas of resilience, adaptive peace-building, and transitional justice. Such groups could allow for sharing experiences, creating common identity, receiving psychosocial support, mobilization of resources, and participating in local justice mechanisms. The importance of such groups derives from their ability to transform individual experiences of victimhood into a collective agency. This approach is very relevant to this research project as it contests the idea that survivors are passive beneficiaries of governmental or NGOs initiatives. The reason is that the survivors have crucial information about the conflict and its consequences.

There have been recommendations that in order for recovery to be sustainable, both individual aspects and social environments need to be taken into account. Ungar's (2011) social ecological model of resilience holds that resilience is not just an individual characteristic of psychology. Instead, it is affected by the presence or absence of resources that have significance and the capacity

Forgotten Voices After War: A Secondary Evidence Synthesis of Survivor Experiences, Transitional Justice, and Social Reintegration in Northern Uganda

of individuals to connect with such resources in the social and cultural environments. This is especially applicable in the case of Northern Uganda. An individual who was once abducted may have high levels of resilience yet fail to recover due to the presence of stigma, unemployment, poverty, lack of family acceptance, and poor mental health services in the environment around him or her. As a result, any interventions to improve the situation have to be integrated both social and economic. Counseling without livelihood programs, family acceptance, and social protection may not bear any transformative fruits.

Socioeconomic reintegration is another essential element of sustainable recovery. Conflicts disrupted livelihoods, educational opportunities, land tenure, and family assets in Northern Uganda. All these disruptions affect survivors' ability to reconstruct their lives independently. Literature on children born in captivity has shown how the link between land and economic security can be established. According to Denov et al. (2023), land is not only a material asset but also an important element of identity and connection. Therefore, land-based activities can affect not only economic outcomes but also the psychosocial well-being of former captives. A survivor-centered strategy should include livelihood development, educational opportunities, land tenure, skills training, and social safety nets in addition to formal justice processes.

Truth telling can play a part in transitional justice by ensuring that there is public recognition of stories that have been silenced, denied, or marginalized. For survivors, the simple act of being recognized and listened to can have intrinsic value because it defies the sense of invisibility that comes with being stigmatized. Nonetheless, it needs to be noted that truth telling is a practice that needs to be well thought out since it should neither compel victims to relive painful experiences nor presume that public recognition will necessarily result in a sense of healing. Instead, the process of truth telling should create spaces that are safe and voluntary in nature where victims decide what they would like to disclose and how. Truth telling is especially important in the case of Northern Uganda since it will provide a fuller picture of the extent of responsibility in the case. Highlighting the responsibility of the LRA may overshadow abuse carried out by other parties, including the government.

Moreover, peace sustainability involves much more than just the lack of organized violence. Peace sustainability requires social interactions and institutions capable of dealing with conflict situations without resorting back to violence. This means that in Northern Uganda, the issue of peace sustainability can be addressed through examining relationships between the survivors, formerly abducted individuals, their families, communities, and institutions. As illustrated by Alipanga and Luberega (2024), the issue of looking into perspectives of people who were affected by war is crucial. This indicates that apart from the number of people participating in reconciliation programs or program outputs, the participants' feeling of acceptance, restoration of relationships, decrease of stigma and improvement of their wellbeing needs to be taken into consideration.

LITERATURE SYNTHESIS AND RESEARCH GAP

A number of significant findings can be outlined on the basis of the reviewed literature. First, the effects of LRA violence persist even long after the end of hostilities. Formerly abducted people face ongoing psychological, socio-economic and identity-based challenges (Allen et al., 2020; Amone-P'Olak et al., 2014a, 2014b). Second, reintegration processes have a gender dimension. Formerly abducted women and mothers face particular challenges linked to sexuality, forced marriage, motherhood, stigmatization, and expectations set by patriarchy that are distinct from the challenges faced by returning males (Savard & Michaelsen, 2021; Kiefer, 2025). Third, the effects of the conflict are intergenerational. The children who were born in captivity continue to navigate their identities, family relations, land claims and social inclusion (Denov et al., 2023; Atim et al., 2023). Fourth, psychological wellbeing is impacted both by war-time experiences and post-war realities. This implies that trauma-based interventions have to be coupled with broader interventions that would tackle social exclusion, economic insecurity and lack of access to services (Amone-P'Olak et al., 2014a, 2014b). Finally, there still exists a considerable distance between the formal mechanisms of transitional justice and the lived priorities of the victims. While Uganda has developed a national transitional justice policy framework, some interventions seem to be top-down and insufficiently attuned to the realities of rural and diverse victim groups (Schulz & Ngomokwe, 2021).

In spite of the large amount of research conducted, there are three significant gaps that have yet to be addressed. Firstly, there is an integration gap. Most of the literature deals with the psychological wellbeing of the people, the issue of gender, the process of reintegration, children born in captivity, reconciliation and transitional justice separately. Secondly, there is a participation gap. While survivor participation is getting increasingly recognized as important, there still needs to be more work done on the role of survivor narratives not only as evidence of victimization but also as a tool in the process of shaping and implementing transitional justice and reintegration policies. Thirdly, there is an intergenerational and structural gap. The case of children born in captivity shows that conflict-related marginalization continues beyond the victims themselves. The problems of land tenure, family membership, gender norms, poverty and stigmatization could continue reproducing disadvantage in the following generations. As a result, the framework of transitional justice, that tends to focus mostly on individual perpetrators and the process of violations that happened in the past could fail to take into account the structural factors that maintain the effects of conflict.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

This research employed a combined theoretical approach, which includes Transitional Justice Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Social-Ecological Resilience Theory. All three theories complement each other and do not conflict with one another. Transitional Justice Theory provides information about society reactions to the mass violence heritage; Social Identity Theory deals with the formation of wartime identities and categories that lead to the development of stigmatization and exclusion; and Social-Ecological Resilience Theory tells about the role of relationships, institutions, resources, and other factors in individual recovery process. The choice of the theoretical integration is appropriate in light of the research problem, which is multidimensional and cannot be described through only psychological traumas or deficiencies of formal mechanisms of justice.

The most central theoretical basis for the research is Transitional Justice Theory as advanced by Teitel (2000). Transitional justice is concerned with societal responses to human rights abuses and atrocities committed during a period of political change in a society. These are mechanisms such as criminal justice, truth seeking, reparations, institution building, among others. Transitional justice theory is appropriate for this research in that it gives room for an investigation into the issue of whether formal justice mechanisms meet the requirements of survivors. Transitional justice in the Northern Ugandan case refers to justice, truth telling, traditional justice, reconciliation, and reparations. The four elements of the National Transitional Justice Policy of Uganda clearly identify that accountability, reconciliation, social reintegration, and reparations are important elements of the national policy framework. The theory will help the study go beyond the notion that justice simply means prosecution. To a survivor, justice may mean recognition, truth, reparation, social acceptance, reconciliation of broken relations and restoration of dignity. In this particular study, transitional justice theory will help the study examine the link between: Past conflict related violations → transitional justice mechanisms → survivor recognition and participation → social reintegration and recovery → sustainable peace.

Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), proposes that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups. Group categorization can generate distinctions between “us” and “them,” with consequences for attitudes, behavior, status, and belonging. The theory is particularly relevant to formerly abducted persons because captivity may produce identities that are difficult to reconcile with community expectations. A person who was abducted as a child may be simultaneously perceived as a victim and as a former rebel. Children born in captivity may similarly be categorized according to their parents' wartime identities. The theory therefore helps explain how labels such as “former rebel,” “returnee,” or “child of a rebel” can influence social acceptance. When a community defines a particular category negatively, members of that category may experience stigma, exclusion, discrimination, and reduced access to social resources. The theory also has implications for interventions. If reintegration involves restoring positive social identities, then programs should create opportunities for survivors to participate as community members rather than treating them permanently as victims. Survivor groups, community dialogues, shared livelihood initiatives, and reconciliation processes can potentially create new forms of collective identity that reduce the salience of wartime categories.

Social-Ecological Resilience Theory by Ungar (2011) makes up the final part of the framework. It looks at resilience not only as a trait but as a process that results from the interaction between the individual and his or her social and physical environment. This theory is especially relevant since recovery of the survivors will largely depend on their ability to access certain resources such as family support, community support, education, medical assistance, job opportunities, land, social connections, and culturally appropriate healing. The theory postulates that the lack of available and accessible resources can limit one's resilience. Therefore, a formerly abducted individual who experiences poverty and social isolation should not be viewed as a person without personal resilience.

The framework can thus be applied at different levels, including: a) Individual Level: Trauma, psychological well-being, agency, identity, and coping; b) Family Level: Acceptance, family relations, parenthood, marriage, and kinship; c) Community Level: Stigma, reconciliation, social network, culture, and community; d) Institutional Level: Health care services, education, justice mechanisms, livelihood programs, and transitional justice mechanisms; and e) Structural Level: Poverty, gender disparity, land tenure system, marginalization and national policy. The ecological theory thus complements Transitional Justice Theory as it clearly shows that justice mechanisms function in larger social contexts.

METHODOLOGY

In this research, an evidence synthesis framework involving the use of secondary data and mixed methods was used. The method combines data obtained using quantitative approaches from large data sets and qualitative data from publication studies, survivor narratives, policies and institution reports. It was an appropriate approach since much empirical data had already been collected with regards to the war through population surveys, records of reception centers, longitudinal studies and qualitative studies. There was no need for primary data collection but the existing data set was synthesized to come up with patterns regarding mental distress, stigmatization, re-integration and access to justice among others.

The analysis was based on the following four main groups of secondary data sources:

Forgotten Voices After War: A Secondary Evidence Synthesis of Survivor Experiences, Transitional Justice, and Social Reintegration in Northern Uganda

1. Population-level surveys, such as the Northern Uganda survey involving some 2,875 individuals on exposure to violence, abduction, mental health, and attitudes to peace and justice (Pham et al., 2007).
2. Large-scale reception centers and ex-child soldier databases, for example, those with information about thousands of returnees and war experiences of former child soldiers (Allen et al., 2020; Vindevogel et al., 2011).
3. Longitudinal and qualitative studies, including research into reintegration of former LRA returnees, formerly abducted women, and children born in captivity (Allen et al., 2021; Denov et al., 2023; Kiefer, 2025).
4. Policy and institutional documents, such as Uganda's National Transitional Justice Policy and respective reports on accountability, reconciliation, reparations, and victim assistance.

Primary scholarly literature published from the beginning of the conflict up until 2026 was preferred, with emphasis on recent studies that deal with reintegration, gender, children born in captivity, reconciliation, and transitional justice.

Purposive sampling was done based on four main criteria: (a) the relevance of the source to the LRA war and northern Uganda; (b) empirical information about the survivors of the conflicts or the affected community; (c) the methodology of the research; and (d) the relevance to any of the research questions. In instances where multiple studies addressed similar effects, studies with a larger sample size, longitudinal studies, studies using population-based sampling, or those with detailed qualitative data were chosen. Results from various sources were not statistically combined when there were differences in the sampling techniques, measures, population under study, or periods under review.

Quantitative results were synthesized by means of descriptive and comparative analysis. Frequencies, percentages, prevalence rates, odds ratios, and other effect size measures were compiled if available. In particular, special focus was made on: exposure to violence and abduction; PTSD, depression, and psychological suffering; length of imprisonment and severity of abuse; stigma and social exclusion; family and community acceptance; education and employment; land and socioeconomic security; and engagement in processes of transitional justice and reconciliation. Qualitative findings were subject to thematic analysis and consideration of recurring themes of identity, belonging, stigma, trauma, motherhood, children born in captivity, justice, reconciliation, and survivor empowerment.

After that, quantitative and qualitative data were compared in order to find convergence and divergence. Similar results obtained through independent sources were considered a source of increased validity, while divergent results were compared in terms of population, gender, geography, methodology, and time frame.

The analysis was done along the three research objectives using the theoretical framework. Objective One dealt with the experiences of the survivors and their difficulties in post-conflict situations, looking at psychosocial, sociocultural, gender, and socio-economic aspects. Objective Two involved an analysis of the link between the experiences and transitional justice and reintegration processes. Objective Three was about finding the survivor-oriented approaches that would help improve restorative justice and sustainable peace. The results were analyzed based on the frameworks of Transitional Justice Theory (Teitel, 2000), Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and Social-Ecological Resilience Theory (Ungar, 2011). This made it possible to combine formal justice processes with social identity, community integration, psychological well-being, and availability of material and institutional resources.

DATA QUALITY, ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

Validity of the findings was enhanced through the use of source triangulation, methodological comparison, and assessment of the quality of individual studies. Preference was given to studies that were population-based, longitudinal, and transparent in terms of methodology. Also, the study made a distinction between the findings that were backed up with empirical data and those that were based on theory or documents. As different researchers had compiled the datasets at different times, the analysis did not presume that the prevalence rates presented could be compared.

Since the research was entirely based on already existing secondary data, which are freely available in public or documented sources, no human subject interviews have been conducted for this research. The ethical considerations thus involve proper representation of the survivors, the protection of confidentiality if any sensitive data are present in the secondary dataset, and avoiding any stigmatization or deficit approach to them. The research views survivor stories as evidence, not just examples.

Secondary data has a number of limitations as well. First, there are differences in the purpose of data collection, and, thus, sampling, measures used, geographic spread and time periods when data was collected. Second, there are certain groups, particularly children born into captivity and abducted women, that are relatively underrepresented. Third, there is no longitudinal data set on all aspects of reintegration. Thus, the research does not attempt to provide a single population-based estimate of survivor wellbeing. Rather, it attempts to find patterns of convergence in various large independent datasets and to interpret their social meaning.

The main methodological strength in this paper lies in the combination of data from statistics and survivor-oriented qualitative research. Thanks to that, the paper avoids being confined only to case studies and at the same time not be based merely on statistics. It is an appropriate methodology for studying the “voices that have been forgotten,” which is why it combines the patterns of

Forgotten Voices After War: A Secondary Evidence Synthesis of Survivor Experiences, Transitional Justice, and Social Reintegration in Northern Uganda

psychological and economic discrimination with the experiences of the survivors regarding their identity, stigma, belonging, justice, and recovery. Thus, the methodology helps to make the main argument of the paper that post-conflict recovery must be measured not only by the lack of armed violence or presence of transitional justice mechanisms, but also by the extent of recognition, dignity, inclusion, recovery, security, and participation of the survivors in the peace process.

FINDINGS

According to the secondary synthesis of evidence, there are three interrelated patterns found in post-conflict Northern Uganda. These are; the lived (lasting experiences) psychosocial and socioeconomic challenges of conflict on the survivors; the discrepancy between formal transitional justice and the experience of justice; and the ongoing need for survivor-focused, longer-term approaches to reintegration.

Lived Experiences and Post-Conflict Challenges of Survivors

There is ample evidence from the large-scale population showing the immense psychological distress associated with LRA-related violence. Population based survey done by Pham et al. (2007) using 2,875 participants from eight districts in northern Uganda showed that 33% of participants had been abducted and this figure rose to 49% among the Acholi participants. Those who experienced abduction had 67% of them with PTSD symptoms and 40% with depression symptoms while the corresponding rates among those who had not been abducted were 51% and 25.9% respectively. Thus the probability of PTSD and depression among the abductees was about twice as great as among others. Evidence from former child soldiers provides additional support to this finding. The large number studies on formerly abducted children provide evidence of widespread violence, witnessing violence, committing atrocities and long-term captivity experiences. Psychological impact of such traumatic events was not only dependent on whether one had been abducted but also the degree and the intensity of the exposure to wartime violence. Thus evidence shows that psychological distress should not be seen as an independent outcome of the traumatic experiences during the war. Instead, it should be viewed within the social and economic circumstances. Trauma can worsen or remain when the survivor experiences the following: poverty, discrimination, rejection, unemployment, insecurity of land and lack of psychosocial care facilities. This study adopts the Social-Ecological Resilience approach that sees recovery as dependent on the interplay between the capacity of the individual and resources that exist at the level of the family, community and institutions.

The key theme emerging from the literature is the difference between physical return and reintegration. Records from the large-scale study indicate that thousands of kidnapped children and youth were repatriated via reception and rehabilitation centers. But studies carried out after that have revealed that although reception and reunification were successful, they did not necessarily lead to social integration. Studies have found that some of the returnees faced problems related to family, community acceptance, livelihood, and access to land years after returning home. According to Allen et al. (2020, 2021), although some returnees had initially felt successful because they were integrated into their families and communities, some of them later faced abuse, social rejection, and socio-economic insecurity. In other words, the study rejects models of programs that consider reintegration as returning back to the family/community.

Stigma seems to come up constantly as one of the biggest barriers to post-conflict recovery. Former abductees may still be associated with the LRA in contexts where they had been abducted and forced to participate. Thus, there is an ongoing struggle in the perception of victims of violence as people who were once rebels. This problem seems especially severe among those children who were born during the period when their mothers lived in captivity. As it was found out, their integration into the community is hampered by three forms of stigmatization related to each other: perception of the child as "born in the bush," being associated with the LRA, and the uncertainty about his fatherhood. This type of stigma impacts social interactions, engagement in communal activities, identity formation, and access to resources. A recent study of children born in captivity in Lango communities provides a new insight into the issue. It has revealed that the stigma changes over time and depends on the intergenerational relations, community norms, and place of the person in the family hierarchy. This fact is of particular significance for the Social Identity Theory. The issue is not just the psychological trauma of many survivors but the reconstruction of their identity in order to become a part of society.

The evidence suggests that women who had been connected to the LRA are faced with distinctively unique problems in reintegration. Women who were returned along with children born during the time of captivity would be facing problems of stigma on account of their abduction, their experiences of having been married or raped in the process and because of the identity of their children. The experiences of these women prove beyond any doubt that the effects of conflict are gendered and generational. The problems that these women are likely to face include family rejection, dependency, difficulties in maintaining healthy relationships, uncertainties in respect of the paternity of the children, and conflict over land and property inheritance. The evidence suggests that generic reintegration programs do not pay attention to these aspects of the experiences of women.

Children born while in captivity are an example of what the study refers to as "the forgotten voices." They were never born into the choice and, for many, never took part in the fighting. However, even in such cases, they can still end up being affected socially by the aftermath of the LRA conflict. There have been indications that children who were born in captivity have to deal with

Forgotten Voices After War: A Secondary Evidence Synthesis of Survivor Experiences, Transitional Justice, and Social Reintegration in Northern Uganda

discrimination, social exclusion, poverty, and struggle with their identity and relationships within the family. It has recently been observed that stigma persists in such children and is also fought against through positive family and community relationships. This means that the impacts of the LRA conflict go beyond the direct victims of abduction.

The discrepancy between formal transitional justice and the experience of justice

Uganda has instituted a policy framework designed to deal with issues of accountability, reconciliation, social reintegration, and peace building. The National Transitional Justice Policy has been put in place after consultations, and it is clear that it seeks to provide justice, accountability, reconciliation, and social reintegration. Nonetheless, it is clear from the findings in this paper that there exists an apparent disconnect between what is officially recognized by the policy makers and what survivors face. While the official mechanisms tend to concentrate on issues of accountability, prosecution, truth, and legal accountability, the day-to-day struggles of the survivors tend to involve issues such as food security, emotional trauma, land, livelihoods, education, social acceptance, and stigma. It becomes clear from this point that the presence of institutions for transitional justice does not automatically mean that survivors live lives of justice.

However, there have been significant improvements in formal accountability. In 2024, Thomas Kwoyelo, former LRA commander, was convicted in Uganda for 44 counts of war crimes, such as murder, rape, enslavement, torture, and kidnapping. Nevertheless, subsequent decisions concerning his sentencing and reparations illustrate growing understanding of the necessity to provide victims not only with criminal but also material compensation. In December 2024, the Ugandan High Court ordered the government to compensate victims of Kwoyelo's crimes, and the amount of each compensation could reach UGX 10 million per victim. Internationally, the ICC ordered more than €52 million in reparations for almost 50,000 victims of crimes of Dominic Ongwen, including former child soldiers and children born of forced pregnancies. However, these cases illustrate significant progress in the field of formal recognition of the victims' needs. However, it appears evident that legal accountability is not sufficient to address the social and economic consequences of the conflict.

The findings indicate that people have varied views on the meaning of justice. Criminal procedures offer accountability, as well as a documented account of the wrongdoing. But communities can value aspects of reconciliation, forgiveness, relationship restoration, and peaceful coexistence. The example of Kwoyelo highlights this issue. Whereas some of the affected communities received the conviction as an essential form of justice, there was skepticism about whether the prosecution could ensure reconciliation and the need for taking into consideration the practices of the Acholi in regards to restorative justice. This finding supports the significance of considering transitional justice as a multiple process.

However, while there appears to be increasing acceptance of the need for reparations institutionally, the evidence also points to the fact that the needs of survivors go beyond cash payments. For those survivors who find themselves landless, poor, stigmatized, distressed and their education interrupted, a cash payment may assist them but cannot by itself help bring about a sense of social inclusion or deal with trauma. It is for this reason that reparations should be viewed as something that goes far beyond financial payments and which must also include: financial compensation; health and psychosocial services; education and livelihood opportunities; land and housing security; community rehabilitation; recognition of the wrongs done; restoration of dignity; and involvement in the development of reparations programs.

Survivor-focused, longer-term approaches to reintegration for Sustainable Peace

Data reveals that the concerns of the survivors transcend the issue of institutionalized accountability. Through their lived experiences, there seems to be a need for a multi-dimensional approach to justice in terms of recognition, psychosocial healing, social acceptance, material security, and participation. The persistent gap between institutional initiatives and the real-life situation of the survivors suggests the need for the active involvement of the survivors in the process of designing, implementing, and assessing the interventions. This is especially so because general categories such as victims, returnees, or war-affected communities may not capture the differences in the needs of the survivors.

Evidently, psychological problems do not go away automatically once the fighting is over. In light of the continued existence of PTSD, depression, isolation and other trauma-related issues, there is the need for continued psychosocial assistance. Nevertheless, it is essential not to treat mental health efforts independently of socioeconomic efforts. In light of the Social-Ecological Resilience approach, psychological wellbeing is greatly influenced by factors such as family relations, livelihoods, social networks, land ownership and access to community assets. It therefore makes sense to incorporate psychosocial activities into livelihood development, education, family reconciliation and social protection activities.

The data shows that material security forms an integral part of sustainable reintegration. Land plays a key role both as an economic asset and a means of identifying oneself as a member of one's family and gaining social recognition. It is especially crucial for children who were born into captivity because their social status may depend on the ambiguity of paternity and inheritance. Recent findings confirm that land and location play an integral role in the social integration and identification of children who were born into captivity.

Forgotten Voices After War: A Secondary Evidence Synthesis of Survivor Experiences, Transitional Justice, and Social Reintegration in Northern Uganda

This evidence does not show how the survivors have to be viewed solely as traumatized or vulnerable people. It has been shown that the survivors have proven themselves resilient, raised families, made a living for themselves, and taken part in community life. Even recent studies on children born into captivity have shown that resilience can be increased through social networks and positive relationships. It means that a change in the approach must take place from assistance of victims to empowerment of the survivors.

Persistence of “Invisibilization”

Invisibility manifests itself in different ways. For starters, survivors are likely to become invisible to decision-makers when humanitarian concerns start diminishing. Secondly, general definitions of conflict victims will overshadow those defined by gender and age. Thirdly, children who have been born in captivity are likely to stay marginal because their experiences do not fall within the common definition of war victims. Lastly, the psychological and sociological impacts will become less important compared to indicators such as return and peace. In particular, the recent findings regarding children born in captivity are very interesting since the stigmatization and issues of belonging continue influencing the lives of these individuals even though the war is long gone. The results, therefore, show that the end of the conflict should not mark the end of transitional justice.

CONCLUSIONS

Secondary evidence synthesis supports three principal conclusions.

To begin with, the impact of the LRA war is still relevant to parts of the survivor community despite the end of the conflict itself. Secondly, there has been considerable progress in terms of the establishment of formal mechanisms for transitional justice, especially in terms of accountability and reparations. However, a large gap exists between formal justice mechanisms and the realities of the recovery and social inclusion processes in the eyes of survivors.

Third, sustainable peace can only emerge with a more comprehensive survivor-centered approach to transition. In addition to accountability, there should be truth telling, psychosocial support, reparations, livelihood and land measures, reconciliation on the family and community levels and survivor participation.

Therefore, the main point of the findings is that the key problem in the post-conflict situation in Northern Uganda is no longer the return of survivors from the conflict, but rather their recognition and inclusion into the social, economic, cultural and justice institutions of their communities. The existence of stigma among ex-abducted people and children born in captivity proves that peace cannot be complete if the survivors are excluded after the conflict has come to an end.

This finding contributes to the development of the concept of “forgotten voices”: the survivors may be formally recognized as victims despite their exclusion from society in the course of their daily lives.

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