

rtc

responding to conflict

Gulu

The Struggle for Peace

This film was commissioned by Responding to Conflict. It was filmed by Robert Maletta and produced by Trojan Horse Productions Ltd with funding from Comic Relief and the Samuel Rubin Foundation.

NOTES ACCOMPANYING THE 'GULU' VIDEO

1) Introduction

The video tells the story of conflicts that have arisen in Gulu and Kitgum Districts in Northern Uganda. The conflicts have been going on since 1986 and continue to the present day. The conflicts are essentially between the Ugandan Government, headed by President Museveni, and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony, who aspires to overthrow Museveni's Government. The Acholi people, who live in this area, are caught in the middle of this conflict and suffer at the hands of both sides. This conflict is also linked to the ongoing conflict in Uganda's Northern neighbour, Sudan.

In recent times (since 1994), the LRA has increasingly used child abduction as a means of recruitment to its ranks (it is estimated that some 10,000 Acholi children have been abducted and forced to fight for the LRA). The children are brutalised and terrorised: the boys being forced to act as soldiers and kill (sometimes their own relatives and neighbours) while the teenage girls are forced into sexual slavery, often ending up with unwanted children and/or sexually transmitted diseases.

It is against this background that the local community, the Acholi people, local based NGOs, the local Parliamentarians, and local Government officials alongside ACORD (Agency for Co-operation and Research in Development) and International NGOs, which had maintained a presence in Gulu, embarked on a series of peace building initiatives with local communities.

2) Peace Building Initiatives

a) GUSCO (Gulu Save The Children Organisation)

More than 2,000 children have escaped from the LRA or been captured in battle by Government troops. GUSCO was set up when family members of these children recognised that they were deeply disturbed by their experiences and in need of help. GUSCO thus set up Trauma Centres to receive these children from the Government troops. They have both physical and psychological injuries, which the Trauma Centres attend to, allowing the children and their communities to begin the process of coming to terms with their violent experiences.

The average stay is around 6 weeks, during which time individual and group counselling is used to help the children come to terms with atrocities they have witnessed. Work is also done with their families and communities, who are asked to welcome back these children, who have been murdering and looting – actions, which are difficult to forgive, even with an understanding that they were forced to participate. Reprisal raids by the LRA on villages from which escapees come, does not aid the process of acceptance and reconciliation. The reintegration process takes place as quickly as possible.

b) 'Mato Oput' – Traditional Reconciliation Process

The role of the elders is crucial in this process. The chiefs have traditional ways of reconciliation and compensation, which are conducted in peaceful ways. People are not punished by being

killed. The revival of traditional tribal ceremonies which encourage interaction between victims and perpetrators is very important. Due to the ongoing conflict, most law and order mechanisms have broken down. Thus traditional reconciliation traditions, such as the 'Mato Oput' ceremony are absolutely essential. The ceremony brings offender and victim together, with their clans, to agree compensation and that reconciliation will occur. Once this has been done, the matter is seen as being closed. This process of reconciliation is being offered to rebels in the conflict, so that they can return without fear of reprisals.

c) Local Radio

Local women compose and sing songs on the local radio, which encourage the rebels to come back home, where they will be welcome in their communities. The hope is that the children will hear the songs and will be encouraged to escape and return home.

d) Women's Groups

The conflict has affected men and women differently. Traditionally, women undertake all activities that are to do with the home. Many have the added burden of being raped – something done by both sides in the conflict. Some have also been mutilated, others maimed by land mines. They are demoralised and also stigmatised, rape victims often being rejected by their husbands. Others have been widowed in the conflict. Women's groups have been formed for women who have been victims of the fighting forces, to give each other mutual support.

e) People's Voice for Peace

This initiative grew out of ACORD, which based its approach on the need to build 'Local Capacities for Peace'. It grew out of a community based organisation that survived the conflict. Training was given to local people and they offer health services to the local population, e.g. medical treatment and check ups for the women, who have been raped and hurt in the conflict.

Support, including financial, is given to self-help groups, which are seen as being vital to the survival of the community. The conflict has led to the collapse of local social structures and the government will not invest in the area due to the ongoing instability. People simply can't wait for help until peace is restored.

f) Income Generating activities

To enable local people to generate their own income, rather than relying on hand-outs is a key principle of ACORD's. This helps people regain their dignity and re-build their self-esteem in situations where they have been robbed of both. This is particularly needed as the Government is not providing assistance to people.

Examples of this kind of activity are:

- Women, who have been disabled, knitting tablecloths, weaving baskets, making shoes
- Women breaking up rocks, which they then sell

ACORD is considering supporting these activities by setting up a revolving fund, to enable people, who otherwise would not have access to loans, to borrow money to develop their businesses.

g) Health Issues

ACORD is also hoping to work with the hospital to provide artificial limbs for those who need them, which should enable people to recover physically and psychologically.

There is much malnutrition and sanitation related diseases are spreading quickly. Children are particularly vulnerable, dying because they are weak with hunger and cannot fight disease. AIDS is on the increase, with HIV incidence in the area the highest in the country.

h) Security Issues

Because of the conflict, many Acholis have had to leave their homes and live in so-called 'protected villages'. It is estimated that 80% of Gulu's population, some 500,000 people, currently live in 'protected villages'. Being cut off from their land and resources, it is difficult for people to provide for themselves. Income generating activities are thus very important for the people living in these villages.

Security is a real issue. Although the villages are meant to be protected by soldiers, it is not always clear who is protecting whom. The need for food (the Food Relief programmes are unable to meet everyone's needs) also leads people to take the enormous risk of returning to their fields to cultivate the land. The risk is that if they are caught by Government soldiers, they will be shot as rebel sympathisers.

ACORD has undertaken Food Security initiatives to encourage people to grow their own food, thus not relying on food aid, and also to get people, especially the youth, involved in economic activity, so that they are less likely to be tempted to join the fighting forces of either side.

i) Rebuilding Trust in the Government

Many people in Gulu do not believe that the Government is taking the war seriously. To try and restore peoples' faith in the Government, the District Commissioner has become involved in the Peace Network. He wants to get to the truth of the human rights situation and is thus encouraging people to report atrocities by **both** sides. Putting this into action has led to soldiers, who killed innocent people, being imprisoned.

j) Training Workshops and Dialogue

Many workshops have been held to strengthen people's skills in dealing with conflict. This has involved conflict analysis and dialogue. One of the main outcomes of this analysis and dialogue is that people, whoever they are, and whatever their allegiances, realise that they are all losing from the conflict situation and have nothing to gain from its continuation.

3) Implications For Practitioners

What messages are there in the **Gulu story** for practitioners? The following are ones that we have drawn from it. You may find others and you may disagree with some of our conclusions. They are just meant to be a start of the debate.

- Peace Building is not simply about trying to bring an end to violent conflict (important though that often is) – it includes a whole range of activities aimed at helping individuals to recover, heal and participate in their communities; and for those communities to be re-built and become self-sufficient once more.
- It is important to recognise that perpetrators of violence can also be victims, as in this case of the children committing atrocities only because they were forced to. Seeing them also as victims, helping them come to terms with their experiences and re-integrating them into society all need to be done.
- It was important for the Acholi people to take control over their lives, to move away from being victims of war and to become empowered. They are now empowered, coping with the crisis, mitigating its effects and are looking towards the future and trying to build peace.
- The role of ‘Partial insiders’, e.g. Rosalba – though working for an International NGO, was more than just an employee. She had a stake in the peace and conflict and took the role of trying to bring an end to the violent conflict. This brings us to the need to re-examine our own values and guiding principles in our work in peace building.
- There is a need to look at the immediate needs, the effects of the conflict and working on the conflict of self and having a long term vision in terms of working on the root causes in a transformative approach.
- The importance of traditional tribal structures and reconciliation processes in re-building communities.
- Using the media to try and send messages of welcome and acceptance to fighters, who may be unsure of the reaction they will receive if they return to their homes.
- The importance of encouraging self-help groups for victims of the conflict to offer support to each other and to help each other re-build their lives.
- Financial and organisational support may be required for these groups, particularly if the government is unable/unwilling to provide it.
- The need for health provision to provide medical treatment for diseases and check ups so that people’s physical ailments can be dealt with. The need for counselling (delivered in a culturally appropriate manner) for people’s psychological ailments to be dealt with.
- The need for food aid to deal with immediate problems of malnutrition and starvation.
- The importance of income generation activities both to help people regain their dignity, self-esteem and a measure of control over their own lives as well as to try and ensure that they do not become dependent on food and other aid.
- The essential requirement of providing food security measures to enable people to grow their own food in areas where it is still dangerous, due to the ongoing conflict.
- The importance of ensuring gainful economic activity for the young men, to try and provide a viable alternative to joining/ re-joining the armed forces of any side in the conflict.
- The need to re-build trust between individuals and between communities and government structures, which break down during conflicts.

- The importance of governments being seen to be fair and taking action, not only against rebel forces, but also against their own troops, who break the law and/or commit atrocities.
- The benefits of training workshops to build on people's skills in dealing with conflict situations; two important elements are conflict analysis and facilitating dialogue.
- The importance of dialogue to re-establish communication and help people see that no-one, at a local level, really benefits from the continuation of the conflict.

4) Using The Video With A Group

The following are some ideas on how the video might be used in a group to generate discussion or as part of a training event. They are not designed to be prescriptive: group leaders, facilitators and trainers should use their creativity in how best to use the material.

- Allow at least as long (35 minutes) to discuss the video afterwards, as it takes to watch it.
- Explain something about the background of the conflict to the group before they see the video.
- Ask people to make notes as they watch about particular ideas or issues that strike them *or* ask people to watch the video without making notes and try and retain points of interest for discussion later. It could be useful to use RTC's Framework for Sustainable Peace to guide people in making notes.
- Ask people to note any similarities and differences to conflict situations they themselves have experienced or are experiencing.
- Either as a whole group, or in small groups, ask people to discuss their response to the video. Ask them whether it has contributed anything to their understanding of working with conflict situations.
- Either as a whole group, or in small groups, ask people to discuss whether there are any ideas in the video that could be applicable to a conflict situation they are experiencing or could potentially experience in the future.
- If group members are currently working or living in a conflict situation, ask them to consider what, if any, action they or their organisations might consider taking to try and improve the current situation.

Responding to Conflict (RTC) works internationally to provide practical capacity –building programmes in support of people working for peace, rights and sustainable development. For more information contact:

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