From 1987 to 2006, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) waged a ruthless guerrilla campaign in northern Uganda that aimed to overthrow the Ugandan government and establish a theocratic state. While the nineteen-year-long rebellion saw a high number of human rights abuses, the most disturbing aspect of the crisis has been the forced conscription of children into the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). It is estimated that during the height of the conflict, about 30,000 children—some as young as seven—were abducted to work as child soldiers and porters forced to commit atrocities or to serve as sex slaves to rebels. For the children forced to live in this state of constant fear, violence was imposed as a way of life, resulting in long-lasting psychological trauma.

The LRA’s activity in Uganda began dwindling in 2005 as the insurgent group relocated to neighboring countries. Since then, former child soldiers have returned to their villages and are attempting to grapple with the breadth of pain they have endured. Recognizing how indispensable moral support, guidance, and compassion is to their reintegration and quest
Rehabilitating Former Child Soldiers: An Interview with Jane Ekayu
of Children of Peace Uganda

for self-sustenance, Jane Ekayu, the founder and Executive Director of Children of Peace Uganda, has made the recovery of these children her life’s work. A former child soldier herself, Ekayu become involved in the rehabilitation of returning child soldiers after hearing about them on a radio program in 2004. Shortly afterward, she approached the Rachele Rehabilitation Centre, a private, non-governmental organization established in Lira, Uganda, and worked as a trauma counselor offering a point of connection. Two years after leaving the Centre in 2008, she founded Children of Peace Uganda, non-governmental organization, with the understanding that healing is an ongoing process, and that these returning child soldiers needed continual moral support and therapy.

In this transcribed interview, Jane Ekayu discusses her work with Children of Peace Uganda, her approach to post-war rehabilitation and the moral vision she is working towards in both Uganda and the global community at large.

Tell me the story of how you started Children of Peace Uganda. What brought you to this work?

What drove me to create Children of Peace Uganda was the passion that came from my work with the former child soldiers in Northern Uganda recruited by the LRA headed by Joseph Kony. I worked in a rehabilitation center receiving the children from the military and taking them through trauma therapy, [which] is so much needed, and just generally helping them to recover to some extent before we would do family tracing to try and reunite them with families—if we could find their families, that is. So, I worked there from 2004 to 2006.

Then, from 2007 to 2010, there was an attempted peace deal between the government of Uganda and the LRA rebels, but, unfortunately, it failed. Before the peace negotiations began, the LRA rebels were given a truce by the government of Uganda to cross over to the Congo while there was going to be a negotiation. The borders were closed, so, when the peace deal failed, they could not come back to Uganda. As a person who has worked with these children on a daily basis for all those years, though, I know that the work we did at the Rachele Rehabilitation Centre in Lira was a type of emergency response. Now that the guns had gone silent, there was a high need to follow up with these youth. I kept asking myself, “What becomes of them? They’ve gone back home, they’ve missed out on education, they don’t have gainful skills; so what happens to them then?” My heart knew that I had to do something, and I kept asking myself, what can I do to create a difference in their lives? That’s how I created Children of Peace Uganda.

I started alone. I talked to whoever whenever there was an opportunity for me to speak with somebody. Then this opportunity was presented to me to speak at the International Criminal
Court Review Conference (ICCRC) in 2010 in Kampala. So, that then opened a door for me to speak about issues of child soldiers not only in Uganda but throughout Africa. And not only in Africa: look at Israel, look at Syria, and see also how it affects a child, how wars impact children profoundly across the globe.

So, just going back to the early stages; you did this child therapy work with a rehabilitation center for a few years and despite moving on from the center, you still had a strong moral imperative to continue the work. What were some of the technical steps that went into establishing Children of Peace in Uganda? You mentioned tapping into networks; can you tell me more about obstacles, challenges that came with establishing an NGO?

I started this alone. Just me. There was no money, but I had the heart to do this and I had to move on. I believed that if I have the compassion and if I have the heart, that means that another person somewhere in some part of the globe will too. It may be from my community, or wherever, but I knew someone out there would have the same heart as I do and I believed I would find those people one day. For sure, I’ve been able to meet a number of them who are very passionate about the work that I’m doing.

Another challenge was the resources. It was financially draining on my side, but I decided to focus on what I wanted to see. I wanted to see these young women, who were used as child soldiers or sex slaves, be able to take care of themselves and be able to take care of the children that they returned with—the children they gave birth to. I was thinking, “Okay, if they get empowered through education, through skills training, they will be able to take care of themselves, take care of their children. That would be so beautiful. They would be able to become self-sustaining.”

I focused so much on what I wanted to see, and not what everyone was talking about and the negativity around me. As for the resources, when I started this organization, I had a job. I was working with some organizations, so I had to divide the little resources that I had between helping other children, helping other young women, and helping my own children—I’m a single mother of three. So, I was spread so thin.

And then, as the work grew, I realized I couldn’t work on the other side and help the organization to grow, so I had to give up my job to come and work without pay. I worked six and half years without a salary. I did a little consulting work now and then, but it was tough. The little money that people began giving towards the work helped. Every single contribution, every single donation makes a difference in the lives of the young people we are working with. For the child who was living alone or the child that I wanted to put in
school, every cent mattered. I focused so much on that.

But, we’ve been able to grow. Today, I work with a staff of fourteen, so there are fifteen of us now. So, that has helped me and freed me a little so that I’m able to travel and the work is going on. And then, of course, there was the challenge of setting our policies because institutions should be run on policies. Setting up the policies with limited resources is a struggle, but we’ve been able to grow all these years.

What is the moral vision you’re working towards for Uganda and the global community?

The vision I’m working towards is a peaceful, healthy, and a self-sustaining Ugandan community. You can do so much in development but when you are in a war situation, all that can crumble in an hour. So, how do we create the peace? The guns have gone silent, but there is a silent war that is raging in the hearts of those that were directly affected. It’s most likely that if they are not attended to and given the skills and information that they need, war can happen again at any time.

And then the self-sustaining aspect for them is to equip them with the skills that they need—“gainful skills,” we call them. We’re focusing on agriculture because we look at Uganda as an agricultural country due to the good soil that we have; there is opportunity there. Most of the young people we work with have inherited land, but there is a gap—they don’t have the skills to put the land to good use which could help improve their nutrition and help in generating income for them.

What shifts in self-perception have you seen in the children and adults you provide support to?

They will tell you before they came in contact with us, the Children of Peace Uganda, that they didn’t see the reason to live. Initially, before I started Children of Peace Uganda, I would get a lot of calls. A young girl calls and says, “Ma, what am I living for? I don’t see the reason to live. I would have been better off dead or in captivity to come back to this. What is this?” But, today, you hear them talking about what they want to do in the future. We’ve been with them, provided the right support and now, they’re returning to themselves and claiming what they want to become. They begin to live again.

You mentioned the peace deal that went sour between the Ugandan government and rebels, but has there been any other governmental efforts to mitigate this issue or the effects of what transpired during the war?
I will say that the government helps us oversee the implementation of our projects and the projects of other non-profits doing similar work. So, there have been some efforts, but I would say they’re not good enough. Being a developing country, there is so much we are grappling with. Government officials feel that the guns have gone silent so people can handle themselves now, people have gone home. The violence from the war fostered both forceful removal and displacement, but now the sentiment is “everybody must go home.” But where is home? There is no home. For twenty years, you’ve been in a camp, and then you go home trying to look for where your homestead used to be. They’re telling a former child soldier to get started, but where does he start from?

**Over the last decade, there has been an orchestrated effort by many actors (the public, international advocacy groups, and others) to bring attention to the forced participation of children in hostilities and the need for intervention. As an international spokesperson capable of bringing the issue to visible spaces, what strategies and actions have you advocated for?**

My advocacy work comprises four parts. My number one focus is the prevention of wars. In the forums that I’ve had an opportunity to speak in (such as the UN, different universities, the International Criminal Court, and so many other places), what I’m always saying is that we must prevent wars. It’s possible for countries and communities to sort out their differences without holding a gun. There are no winners in a war situation; everyone loses. There are so many examples. Look at America’s war in Iraq, how many young people have been lost? How many resources have been injected for nothing? You cannot put your hand on anything and say this was the end that justified the means. And what about the people in Iraq? So many people lost. Nobody wins in war, so why do we go for war? Let’s talk about it, let’s talk about our differences, and let’s respect each other since each human being is equal.

The second part is the mitigation of the effects. Usually, people weave their egos into these wars. We want to show them we are powerful. We want to show that we’re above them and that they are a small nation. But if they could think about the effect of what they are doing. If you’re going to throw a bomb, what is going to happen? What damage is that bomb going to do? Do the people who plan this war think about this? What will happen to the innocent child? Most children don’t even know why they are fighting. But, if they could really put that as a priority, if they really go to war, the question is now: how can we mitigate the effects?

The last two things I advocate for are the rehabilitation and empowerment of those who have been directly affected. There’s the psychological and then there is the physical – the injuries. What about the long-term effects? If we looked at that, it would really help us to
count the cost of war before we even think of it as an option. Is it really the best option that human beings can go for? I don’t think so. To me, peace deals are possible.

There is so much pain in the world, and with the increased digitization of news comes the increased visibility of it all. What is your advice to the person who sees this pain and wants to change things but feels as though their hands are too small to do so?

For me, there are no hands that are too small to prevent wars or mitigate or partake in the post-war rehabilitation. Every hand can do something. I believe in starting with “What can I do?” Look at you as a person first and ask, “what can I do to be able to help this situation?” So, when you ask yourself that question, you’re able to draw possible answers, and you can begin acting on that. Once you begin acting on them, look at yourself, look at your surroundings, look at your network. If you are not able to reach the person or people you want to help directly, reach out to the person who may be a stakeholder, a decisionmaker, or a policymaker who can. Ask yourself, “who knows that person that I can go through to be able to reach them?”

It’s not a little task but the change you want to make is possible, and when it happens, it is rewarding. Focus on what you want to see at the end. You’re not going to sit around and listen to everybody discouraging you. It’s like if you were in a race; when you’re in a race, you’re focused on the finish line, the medal you are going to get, the cheers you’ll get when you reach victory; not the bystanders. That’s where the beauty is. Focus on how beautiful it will be when you succeed in preventing war or mitigating harm or helping in people’s recovery.

I meet these young men and young girls who have been badly affected by war, and they don’t even want to talk to anyone. They don’t trust anybody. They don’t think anyone likes them, but after three months, they begin to play. They begin to talk; they are able to go to school. A number of times when I go look at the young people we’ve worked with, I cry. I think to myself, “what if I didn’t say yes to this? What could have happened to all these children?”

I kept and keep looking at that beautiful time when I will see them in their school uniforms. They go to school, and they are learning something new daily. They have something that they’re holding onto, and they know their future is going to be better. I’m looking at how they are going to help other people. That is what I usually tell all the youth and children in our program, the only way you can pay me back is by helping another person. When you grow up, don’t think about me, think about the person coming to you and doing good to and
for that person. That’s all I want.

You can support Children of Peace Uganda’s work in rehabilitating and transforming child survivors of war into future peacekeepers and leaders by donating here.

References


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Eghosa Asemota is an MPA Fellow (‘19) focusing on agricultural and rural development in sub-Saharan Africa. Prior to coming to Cornell, she graduated cum laude from Binghamton University in 2015 with a B.A. in Philosophy, Politics, and Law (PPL). In addition to her studies, she works as a producer for Awake Storytelling, an impact-driven video production company, and has created over 250 social justice videos on topics ranging from immigrant detention to education reform. In 2015, she co-founded ‘Define: BLACK,’ a video series sharing personal stories from people within the African diaspora that has accumulated over ten million views across platforms.

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