Ignored and Forgotten: Challenges, Hopes and Expectations of Victims’ Groups in Northern Uganda

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This report is based on the findings from an assessment of 32 victim associations across Northern Uganda. The assessment highlights the most common, critical needs and challenges faced by the victims’ associations in the region. These needs and challenges range from financial needs, to the need for enhancement of skills and capabilities in order to reach their potential. The report furthermore assesses the various opinions, challenges and benefits related to partnerships and collaborations between the various victims’ groups. The report finds that while the majority are positive towards engaging in both joint advocacy as well as in regional/national days of memory, various challenges prevail to impede their progress. The assessment furthermore shows that the single greatest challenge faced by victims’ groups across Northern Uganda is the lack of funding and/or facilities to carry out their work and thus be able to fulfill their objectives (see fig. 5 and 6). Without a certain level of income or start-up capital, the groups have serious difficulties in reaching a level where they can generate a steady and sustainable income. The recommendations of this report focus on increasing the livelihoods of victims by ensuring sustainable support.

About FJDI

The Foundation for Justice and Development Initiatives was founded in 2015 as a response to the two-decade conflict between the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan Government. We promote justice, development and the economic recovery of communities affected by conflict in northern Uganda. We work with different actors and bring together different groups to find peaceful solutions to conflict. Our work is centred around three main goals: a) To advocate for appropriate policies on democracy, governance, justice and development; b) To promote social economic empowerment for vulnerable individuals, groups and communities in Uganda and c) To conduct research on relevant justice and development issues crucial to national debates and policies.

In 2019, FJDI embarked on a survey to ascertain the needs, challenges and views of victims of conflict in northern Uganda through their victims’ groups/associations with funding support from Robert Bosch Stiftung.

Executive summary
Introduction

A tremendous and unacceptable number of people are still suffering the after effects of the conflict in Northern Uganda, even if it is more than a decade since the guns went silent. The recent passing of the National Transitional Justice Policy (NTJP) puts even greater demand and responsibility on Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) or Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and in particular the national and local governments to respond to the needs of those who suffered: the victims. This report is based on a profiling exercise of victims’ associations in Northern Uganda conducted throughout 2019. The objective of the exercise was to shed light on the grey areas regarding the existence of victims’ associations and their current activities. This report disseminates the results and discusses ways forward for victims’ associations, stakeholders and authorities.

Methodology

The assessment is based on questionnaires and qualitative interviews with respondents from 32 different victims’ groups based in Northern Uganda (see fig. 7), and focuses on the current status of the group, i.e. activities, financial position, engagement with civil society actors and government authorities etc., as well as on the groups’ opinions on and experiences of annual memorial events. While general statistics on the victims associations can be found in the annex, this report aims to provide a brief, but in-depth analysis of the most recurrent themes of the assessment. The groups that form the basis of this report vary in size, location and capabilities, but share many of the same objectives: providing victims and survivors of the conflict in Northern Uganda with support, and seeking reparations from the government and different levels of civil society.

The report is divided into three sections handling the themes of funding and income, needs and challenges, and partnerships and engagements with other victims’ groups. Each section will provide a brief analysis as well as discuss best practices and ways forward for the victims’ associations themselves, for civil society actors and for government authorities.

Funding, income and other forms of support

The forms and amounts of support that the various victims’ associations have obtained varies greatly from group to group. Whereas some groups manage to generate a steady and sustainable income, other groups are fully dependent on voluntary contributions and one-time donations.

The most common activities engaged in to generate income are petty trade, farming and VSLA (Village Savings and Loans Associations) groups (see fig. 8). Most of the groups (22 of 32) engage in VSLA, which is often supported by some additional income from farming, trade or membership donations and fees. The formation and sustenance of a VSLA has in many cases been dependent on an initial donation so as to provide the group with some start-up capital from which to grant loans. VSLA enables the groups to generate a steady and sustainable income, even if it is small, and allows the groups to provide financial as well as other kinds of support to suffering community and group members.
As the coordinator of a group in Barlonyo, who engages in farming in order to support their VSLA expresses:

“They have had success stories from members who borrowed money and solved individual problems. It has also helped us to reduce on the poverty levels as compared to the situation before we began which in turn has contributed to healing among members”.

Other groups use the income generated by the VSLA to directly support the objectives of the group such as documentation, cultural protection, advocacy work, or to assist the most vulnerable members with housing, medical assistance and other urgent needs that they are unable to meet on their own.

Many groups are rather dependent on voluntary contributions and donations from NGO’s, government authorities and well wishers to reach their objectives, whether these are aimed at reparations, supporting survivors etc. Two thirds of the victims’ associations assessed in this study had received support – financial or otherwise - from external entities. Some had been granted support from the national or local government. However, the majority of support was from CSOs. Very few had obtained direct financial support, while the majority had obtained indirect or material support in form of workshops, livestock, iron sheets or similar (see fig. 4). As will be elaborated below, many groups encounter serious challenges when it comes to generating a steady income and advocating for their needs, making the groups completely dependent on external – and often random - support and funding. Several groups have not at any point received financial support but only various training sessions or gifts such as support of memorial prayers.

It is clear that the single greatest challenge faced by victim groups across Northern Uganda is the lack of funding and/or facilities to carry out their work and fulfill their objectives (see fig. 5 and 6). Without a certain level of income or start-up capital, the groups have serious difficulties in reaching a level where the group can generate a steady and sustainable income. As will be elaborated in the following section, this in turn also prevents the groups from obtaining the means needed for them to begin generating an income such as farming equipment, capital to establish a VSLA etc.

For government authorities, CSO’s and other donors, these issues are important to consider when funding or supporting victims’ associations. It is pivotal to consider how support can be given in a sustainable way that assists the groups to generate further income or builds their capacity to do so. This is a point that the victims’ associations are very much aware of, as the majority expressed their needs in terms of capacity
building, farming tools, education etc., rather than just asking for financial support. Thus, for well-wishers to consider how to make their support sustainable, whether it is financial or in the form of training and capacity building, is essential. The same counts for the groups themselves who could benefit immensely from networking with other groups and discussing best practices when it comes to leadership, how to generate income as a group and fundraising. The issues of groups joining together will be discussed in the last section of this report.

As expressed by the leader of Wa Tye Ki Gen commenting on how support can be successful:

“... giving a voice for survivors and an opportunity for them to help themselves is important. They know what to do and what is best for them—they just need guidance.”

Needs and challenges

This section provides an overview and analysis first of what the victims’ groups identify as the most critical needs for them to achieve their objectives, then moves on to discuss the challenges they face in their work as victims’ associations. Furthermore, the section discusses recommendations for how civil society and the government can provide redress both in a short and long term.

The study finds that most of the groups share needs for improving their daily life and work, both at individual levels and as a group. Housing for victims and office facilities for the group is identified as needs by many of the respondents, though most groups manage without office facilities – only a third of the groups have access to an office (see fig. 1). Other needs in line with the above are iron sheets for housing, improved infrastructure in the area etc. This also includes equipment for farming such as livestock and farming tools – more than one third of the groups identified this as a critical need. These can improve the livelihoods of both individual households and benefit the group as a whole, as many groups’ income come from selling agricultural products or engaging in communal farming. Finally, victims’ lack of access to proper health care is seen as a critical need by more than half of the victims’ groups assessed in the study. This need is critical because some people still suffer from physical or mental health-issues obtained in relation to the war, and because illness and stigmatization poses a challenge to some of the groups in conducting their daily work (see fig. 4 and 5).
Furthermore, the study shows that many victims’ groups see the lack of access to education as both a challenge for the daily running of their groups and the achievement of its objectives, and education was thus considered pivotal for the victims. Almost 60% of the victim groups perceive education as one of the most critical needs for the group. Many children were born in the ‘bush’ and have now returned home, some of whom do not know their fathers and hence cannot get enough parental support to obtain quality education. “When children don’t know their fathers, even getting a national identity card (ID) becomes difficult,” says a member of the Wa Tye Ki Gen group. Although there are Universal Primary Education (UPE) Schools in villages, respondents say the services are not completely free, the schools are dilapidated, and the quality of the education provided is not up to standard. The lack of education among group members also poses a challenge for the groups to achieve their goals. This can be seen in the expressed need for capacity training of group members, particularly in financial management, which is called for by a third of the victim groups assessed. Many of the groups and their leaderships lack general management skills which in some cases result in lack of trust from members towards the group leaders, challenges in mobilization and communication and lack of the skills needed for the group to progress. Almost half of the victims’ associations identified problems such as poor leadership, lack of trust in leaders and insufficient communication skills as their most critical challenges. Thus, according to the study, lack of skills and knowledge remain a big challenge to victims, with 60% of the groups assessed identifying this as both a critical need and challenge for the groups. The challenges manifest themselves through the need for advocacy skills, vocational skills, high illiteracy levels and poor leadership – things that all restrain the groups from progressing and obtaining the financial means to develop.

According to the assessment, more than a third of the victims’ groups face the challenges of empty promises or not even getting feedback when they engage with CSOs/NGOs and government bodies, most often in their advocacy efforts and pleas for help. Many groups are frustrated with the lack of feedback after being sought out and interviewed by NGOs and researchers, only to be left to their devices afterwards.

Political interference also hinders the activities of many groups. As a leader of a group in the Lango sub-region said: “The biggest challenge is political. Some people mistake us to be political, the police has raided the office and taken computers, data etc. The RDC and the police have even blocked our meetings”. A quarter of the assessed victims’ groups identify political interference as one of their main challenges as a group. Some clearly stated that their activities had been strictly monitored, compromised, limited or stopped by political actors without clear reasons.

Other challenges such as poverty, stigmatization, health challenges, lack of facilities in terms of office space and equipment to run an office were reported among the most pressing challenges. Poverty has limited victims from saving money in their VSLAs and supporting their families, and the levels of stigmatization is high. Generally, improved sustainability in the work of victims’ groups and the support granted to them is needed if their livelihoods are to be improved. As an example, support in the form of capacity building should focus on equipping victims groups with hands-on skill such as in financial management or vocational skills in order to enable them to generate and manage their own income, and equip members with management and advocacy skills.
Partnerships and engagement with other victims’ groups

The general perception among the victims associations is that engaging in joint advocacy and other collaborations would be a positive and beneficial step, even though it may be associated with some challenges. In the beginning of this section, these challenges and their impact on partnerships between groups is assessed while the final part of the section will focus on attitudes towards a regional or national day of memory.

The victims’ groups assessed prior to this report generally describe their reasoning for wanting to engage in partnerships with other groups in two ways: 1) Because partnerships would provide opportunities for experience-sharing, learning from each other and give support to one another, and 2) Because joining their advocacy efforts together is perceived as a way of getting the attention of stakeholders more easily – a louder voice. Several respondents express the lack of reparations and assistance to war victims and survivors as a regional problem shared by most victims in Northern Uganda, such as the representative of Abia Massacre Association:

“[Joint advocacy] helps us to identify the needs of victims and to come out with one voice - the victims' voice. One body, one identity, one problem - a joint solution.”

Only 3 of the 32 victim groups were directly opposed to engaging in partnerships with other groups. These groups expressed suspicion towards other groups, whom they fear might abandon the common cause to instead pursue selfish needs, or to be a “trick” from the government to try and shut their efforts down.

Eleven of the groups explained that they were already collaborating with other groups or CSOs. Some join together in advocacy, others for annual memorial prayers, exchange visits or to provide various forms of support to community members. The remaining groups that do not have established partnerships with others are generally positive towards collaboration, though some simultaneously identify some challenges for partnerships and joint advocacy to be fruitful. These perceived challenges revolve around a fear of being overshadowed in a larger group with potentially stronger and more powerful voices than their own. Others comment that the practical issues of coordination and leadership will make it challenging to engage with one another in a meaningful way. Finally, some groups lack knowledge of the existence of other similar groups, or the financial means to reach out, visit and engage with others.

Despite the challenges mentioned above, the vast majority of the groups (29 out of 32) are interested and positive towards the notion of joining together. Seventeen of these directly express as a reason for joining together, that unity of voices would enable them to better reach and lobby stakeholders in their advocacy efforts. Though the objectives and expectations of the outcomes from joining in partnerships with other groups varies in scale from group to group: from finding comfort in sharing experiences or discussing and learning best practices from one another, to hoping to be able to lobby the government effectively for reparations, it is clear that most groups would benefit one way or another from joining together. Even if engaging in joint advocacy would put significant demands on the groups’ willingness and ability to
cooperate and compromise, an improvement of the network and contact between the various victim groups would provide avenues for many opportunities. As explained earlier, the successes and challenges vary from group to group, and increased sharing and networking between groups would allow them to learn from each other’s experiences and capabilities. It would be advisable for stakeholders and well wishers to consider how they can pave the way for increasing partnerships and networks between groups. Many groups explain that they lack knowledge and means of contacting other groups; some are simply unaware of the existence of associations similar to their own. As CSOs often engage with and provide support to many of these groups in their daily work, they can be instrumental and invaluable in paving the way for partnerships between victims’ associations across Northern Uganda. There are many ways this can be done and included in the daily work of CSOs: ranging from engaging victims’ associations in joint workshops to sharing contact information and supporting initiatives based on cooperation between groups.

Regional or national day of memory

Along the general attitude towards engaging with other groups in joint advocacy, also the idea of a regional or national day of memory is well received by most victims’ groups. As many as 80% of the groups responding to this question are positive, though to different degrees. It is also apparent that the practicalities of organizing such a day would face significant challenges. Most groups, when asked which day they would suggest as a regional or national day of memory prefer the date that is the groups’ own memorial day, commemorating a massacre that took place in their community. While some groups acknowledge that this may not be agreed upon by all in the region and are open towards a more democratic decision process, the planning and organizing of such an event would demand great sensitivity to the differing wishes and opinions of various stakeholders. The same is the case in questions of the role of different religions, location and activities to take place on such a day.

As expressed by a member of the group from Odokonyero Village:

“A regional or national day of memory would be difficult and impractical to implement. Victims are located in different communities, in different location. Having few members of each group meeting would not create unity. It would be too impractical, it is better to support the communities’ own prayers.”

Another argument posed against the establishment of a national or regional day of memory is that the money that would be spent on such a day would have greater usefulness for the victims if they were to be used in different ways. It is not as such an opposition towards such a day but as the leader of Wa Tye Ki Gen pointed out: some do not see it as the best way to spend a great amount of money.

“Monuments and memorialisation are for history! Not as long as the survivors are still struggling. ... Why should anyone inject money into these things, when people are still suffering and cannot access basic needs.”
Despite these important and relevant observations, the majority of the victims’ groups assessed still see memorial prayers and a joint day of memory as a positive thing and almost one fifth of the groups mention memorial initiatives as one of their most critical needs as victims. But the fact that the need for concrete, tangible support and financial assistance are considered most crucial by victims’ groups is essential to consider for stakeholders and well-wishers when they are seeking to provide support through memorial initiatives. While few groups are directly opposed to the establishment of a national or regional day of memory, most of them see other kinds of support as more important. It is therefore important to take into consideration the expectations that would be associated with such a day. Most groups perceive it as an opportunity for lobbying stakeholders and many would expect reparations as an outcome of such a day.

Thus, it is worth noting that a national or regional day of memory would not eliminate nor lessen the most critical needs of the victim groups: tangible or financial assistance that directly affects the daily lives of victims.

The strength in a joint day of memory of the victims and survivors from the conflict might rather lie in the opportunities for networking, advocacy and attention to victims represented by such a day, rather than the restorative effect of memory in itself.

Concluding remarks

Based on the finding of this assessment, an urgent focus on national transitional justice initiatives is needed if the victims of the conflict in Northern Uganda are to obtain some sort of justice. It is clear from this study that not only are many victims still suffering from the consequences of the conflict, they are also ignored and forgotten by those able to provide some relief. Most survivors are interested in a restorative approach in the form of reparations and memorialization in order to bring them closer to the state they were in before the conflict.

For NGOs and CSOs, the most crucial recommendation based on this report is to ensure the sustainability and capacity-building effect of their support, so that every initiative is directed towards making the victims more self-reliant. It is particularly important for the groups to find ways to obtain a steady income, as this
would better allow them to achieve their objectives, whether these are in the form of lobbying for reparations, granting support to members of the groups or others.

The government of Uganda should have an urgent focus on how to improve the lives of the victims and obtain the trust of the communities in the North. One way is to turn the National Transitional Justice Policy (NTJP) into law and ensure its implementation. A reparations plan needs truth as well as justice to have meaning, and victims need guarantees of non-repetition and reforms in the police, the army and the courts as we need to learn from the mistakes and wrongdoings of the past. However, whereas a reparations program is vital, there is need for an urgent relief program for victims, as the effects of a transitional justice policy becomes visible. Victims need proper quality and free education services, agricultural advancement, livelihood enhancement and funds injected into their different VSLAs to enable them to be self-reliant and productive. The Ugandan government must establish and implement a comprehensive plan for the provision of reparations in which victims’ participation and full transparency must be integrated into the entirety of the consultation process. The values of transparency, bottom-up and victim-centered efforts are essential not only for the government but also for NGOs and CSOs to ensure that their needs are heard and that an increased trust in authorities is obtained.
Statistics

**Figure 1: General statistics**

**Figure 2: Gender composition**

**Figure 3: Regional day of memory**
Figure 4: Support

Figure 5: Needs

Figure 6: Challenges
Figure 7: Activities

Figure 7 Location of the assessed groups
Accomplished with funding support from Robert Bosch Stiftung
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