



HOW CECORE TRANSFORMS YOUTH INTO CHAMPIONS OF PEACE

By Brian Mayanja

Centre for Conflict Resolution (CECORE) is implementing phase II of the Youth Peace Champions project in selected post-conflict communities in Uganda. The project aims at preventing re-radicalisation, in a bid to prevent the targeted youth from sliding back into acts of violence.

The project's main target is youth and young adults who have previously been involved in (armed) violence. It also supports youth groups who are engaged in peace building and "connectors for peace"/income-generating activities. The project has two main interventions – peace building and "connectors for peace".

The project is being implemented in four selected districts this year – Kasese in southwestern Uganda, Kaabong and Amudat in Karamoja sub-region and Amuru in northern Uganda. These youth are transformed upon acquiring skills in peace-building and conflict transformation training.

They then become change agents in their communities and lead in transforming the attitudes of their peers in the community and are referred to as "Peace Champions". The project is funded by the German government through ifa-zivik.

Some of the key activities under the 2022 project include a baseline study, training in peace-building and conflict transformation, skills training in "connectors for peace"/income-generating activities. Other activities are training in trauma healing, management and reconciliation, and training in climate change and

INCOME-GENERATING INITIATIVES

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

He adds that these are income-generating activities, but implemented with peace-building lens. In addition to counselling and mentoring, youth groups are supported with tailored equipment to enhance youth initiatives.

Some initiatives include apiary, welding and metal fabrication, tailoring, goat-rearing, grinding mills, craft work and liquid soap-making. The initiatives not only bring income in the pockets of the youth, but also offer opportunities for employment, reducing idleness, and promoting co-existence as well as unity.

Susan Mbambu, a resident of Kasese district, was one of the locals who benefited from the peace champions project. She joined one of the peace champions group – St Anna Catering Service and borrowed sh300,000 to start a piggery business.

"The business grew, I sold some pigs and was able to pay school fees for my children and provide for the family," Mbambu says.

conflict nexus.

Others include provision on supplementary materials for "connectors for peace" initiatives, community awareness-raising and dialogues, mentoring, market linkages and experience-sharing meeting.

The project builds on similar ones in 2019, 2020, and 2021 in the districts of Kaabong and Kotido in Karamoja sub-region (northeastern Uganda), Kasese (southwestern Uganda), Yumbe (West Nile sub-region) and Lira (northern Uganda). The projects are implemented in an inclusive and active participatory manner with active participation of the youth (male and female) and other actors such as community members, community leaders, local government leaders, civil society organisations, existing community infrastructures for peace in a "whole of society" approach of transforming

conflicts, promoting and sustaining peace.

HOW CECORE IS ADDRESSING RE-RADICALISATION AND BUILDING PEACE

This is done in three stages. The first stage is to build the capacity of the Youth Peace Champions in peace-building and conflict transformation, trauma healing, management and reconciliation, income generation, and addressing negative effects arising from climate change and conflict nexus.

The peace champions become change agents in their communities by transforming the knowledge, attitude, practices and skills of fellow former warriors/ combatants or child soldiers.

Secondly, the project supports the youth peace champions to engage in peace-building sensitisation and awareness.

Thirdly, the project equips the youth peace champion



Some of the peace champions started animal rearing projects such as piggery



One of the connectors for peace initiatives by peace champions in Lira

CECORE HAS HELPED IN COPING WITH TRAUMA, RESTORING HOPE AND EMPOWERING FORMERLY ABDUCTED CHILDREN, THOSE BORN IN CAPTIVITY AND FORMER CHILD SOLDIERS IN NORTHERN UGANDA AND WEST NILE.

groups with practical skills and equipment for enhancing "connectors for peace" initiatives that provide key alternatives to gun-violence, transform mindset, provide employment and keep youth busy, promote unity and co-existence

and sustaining healthy relationships.

CHAMPIONING PEACE IN KARAMOJA

Karamoja sub-region has had a long and complex history of gun violence, escalated by cattle theft and raiding within and

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

CECORE'S ROLE IN RESTORING HOPE

From 20

The project is working with the peace champions and alumni to facilitate joint community engagements between the security actors, authorities, community and reaching out to warriors as a way of fostering peace.

Nakason Lopwon, a member of Kaloboki – a peace champions group in Kaabong district – says he voluntarily surrendered the gun to the Government.

"Right now, no government official or security personnel is threatening me with any arrests. I joined these people as a member of peace champions and I move with them to preach the message of peace," he adds.

Lokure Mateo, from Lois, Kaabong district, says: "I returned the gun to the Government and I have since embraced peace and have mobilised my peers to rather engage in IGAs. I am now at peace and safe".

Lomus Clementina, also from Kaabong district, says: "I used to support the rustlers whenever they would go for raiding; I used to prepare for them dry rations (food), tobacco and boiled maize. I even used to encourage others to join the raids so that they could get cows for marriage. But most of them were killed in the raids. I am now preaching peace."

WHEN RWENZURURU SUBJECTS CLASHED WITH GOVT SOLDIERS

Government security forces accused some of the youth in the region of being a militia – referred to as *Kirumira-mutima* (resemblance of suicide bombers), who attacked the military installations in Kasese. The military responded by attacking the palace of the cultural leader – Omusinga Charles Wesley Mumbere – and over 100 people are reported to have been killed during the violent conflict.

Many of the youth and the royal guards of the kingdom were arrested until recently when some were released on bail.

Among the royal guards who were arrested and jailed for almost five years, was Anne Kitugo. She was released in January 2021. When she returned home, Kitugo says things were never the same.

"When I came back, people were scared of me. They referred to me as a terrorist. The peace-building training I got from Center for Conflict Resolution helped me a lot. I am no longer afraid of anyone; I am at peace. In fact, in my area, everyone knows that I am now a member of a peace organisation," Kitugo narrates.

DEALING WITH TRAUMA, RESTORING HOPE

Uganda has faced multiple and violent interlinking conflicts and



Some of the beneficiaries making sandals. Other areas in which they are trained include apiary, welding and metal fabrication, tailoring, goat-rearing, grinding mills, craft work and liquid soap-making



Bwire (left) interacting with warriors who recently handed over guns to the Government and joined one of the peace champions groups in Kaabong

CECORE'S MAIN PURPOSE IS TO EMPOWER INDIVIDUALS, WOMEN AND MEN, COMMUNITIES, ORGANISATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS EFFECTIVELY BY APPLYING ALTERNATIVE MEANS OF ENDING THEM.

post-conflict challenges.

For example, in northern Uganda, the region, for over two decades, had one of the long-lasting civil war conflicts.

The rebel group, the Lord's Resistance Army and its leader Joseph Kony, caused untold

suffering to the people of northern Uganda, leading to displacement of over 1.5 million people, abduction of thousands of children and death of tens of thousands.

For many survivors, memories are still fresh in their minds. But

Mary Ochola of Lira district says CECORE's peace-building project has helped to change the minds of many victims.

"People were aggressive and preferred to be lonely. I have seen a lot of changes in our communities, thanks to CECORE. Youth who used to be viewed as perpetrators are spreading the gospel of peace," Ochola, who is also the councillor Angolokom parish, Lira district, says.

Dehona Akello, a member of Chamakiweki Youth Peace Champions Group in Lira district, is also engaged in counselling her friends.

"I now know how to take care of myself, but I also help my friends when they are traumatised," she says.

CECORE has also worked in

ROLE OF CECORE

Many Ugandans like the youth peace champions have benefited from the capacity-building skills provided by CECORE, a non-governmental organisation founded in 1995.

CECORE's main purpose is to empower individuals, women and men, communities, organisations and institutions to transform conflict effectively by applying alternative means of resolving them in order to promote a culture of peace.

Rose Othieno, the executive director of CECORE, explains that at the time when they started running the organisation in 1995, a few NGOs were involved in peace and conflict resolution.

"We realised this was the time to give people skills, so that they were able to understand and effectively resolve their conflicts," she notes.

The Peace Champions project has provided a model for success. The project has realised great success in the lives of individual youth, groups and communities. The intervention has contributed to voluntary disarmament in Karamoja, made girls and women who used to influence armed raids in Karamoja to convince warriors to abandon the vice.

The project has also facilitated the return of youth from hideouts in Kasese, reduced cases of trauma and re-radicalisation in northern Uganda. It has also enabled former child soldiers in places such as Yumbe not to be lured back into violence.

Patrick Bwire, the project co-ordinator, says the initiative is now referred to as a model best practice for transforming the lives of youth, especially in conflict and post-conflict contexts. The learnings from the project have made other actors to initiate similar projects in other countries.

Achuka Abraham of Kaabong district testifies: "I have transformed from being a champion of armed violence through cattle raids to a champion of peace in my community."

Yumbe district in West Nile – working with groups such as the former child soldiers under the defunct Uganda National Rescue Front II rebel group.