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Engaging African Voices on Kony

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A critical perspective has been missing from the conversation resulting from the Kony 2012 campaign: that of those currently living in Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) affected areas.

The voices of affected individuals and communities should be at the center of this swelling chorus of opinions. If they were, perhaps the clamor of criticism could quiet long enough to hear what is being asked of humanitarians, academics, policy makers, and global citizens.

A women's association leader in a community in LRA affected northeastern Congo who cares for children who have escaped from the LRA said, "People in the LRA are killing our own children. We need peace. Advocate on our behalf."

Are we?

Having spent time in recent months traveling in northeastern areas of Democratic Republic of the Congo affected by the LRA, we welcome the attention brought to ending LRA violence sparked by the Kony 2012 film, but now we hope to see attention shifted to the communities where this violence lives daily.

Over the last two decades, the LRA has conducted a sustained campaign of terror, abducting children, killing civilians and looting communities. Although the LRA originally began its atrocities in Uganda, it has since moved into neighboring Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic and South Sudan. And though the LRA's numbers have waned, its ability to render an entire region vulnerable, and in immediate need of assistance, has not. Skeptics and supporters of the video alike need to recognize that the effects of the LRA are immediate and real. Communities are asking for assistance to deal with both the immediate and long-term consequences of this violence - this is where our collective focus should be.

"I don't know how the LRA entered Congo," says a 17-year-old boy who was abducted by the LRA and recently escaped in northeastern Congo. "They just started kidnapping children - they kidnapped the whole school and they kidnapped us too." Roughly 500 children were abducted from one community alone according to a civil society leader in Haut Uele.

One 14-year-old boy said, "The worst event of my life was when my three big brothers and my father were assassinated by the LRA." No child should know what it's like to lose their family to needless violence. And yet entire family structures are currently being torn by

murder, violence, displacement, and insecurity.

"The whole structure of the community is destroyed. The larger family can no longer support each other," said Father Ernest, a Catholic priest and President of SAIPED, a local organization in Dungu.

People we spoke to in LRA-affected areas emphasize an underlying truth of conflict: even modest amounts of violence can create lasting ripple effects that go far beyond the immediate horror of abduction, murder, and pillaging. Men, women and children said they are too afraid to go to their fields, hunt, or trade at local markets for fear of being attacked by the LRA. Communities are living without food or clean water, trying to long-stock abandoned health clinics with even the simplest medications and fighting to keep their social supports functioning in times of deep insecurity.

"People are burying one child while the other is dying at home," said Father Ernest. These deaths are not only from direct violence, but from water-borne illness, malaria, and a profound destruction of the healthcare infrastructure. For every one immediate tragedy of execution or abduction by the LRA, there are untold stories of people fighting a quieter fight - struggling against the pervasive and insidious effects of instability.

The terror wrought by the LRA warrants international attention. But it also requires thoughtful solutions, of which many more are needed. The voices of those affected should guide our response. In the long-term, communities say they need integrated solutions that address the health, economic, and psychosocial impacts of violence.

But right now, communities are asking for security; the most basic human right and a necessity for addressing other problems. As Father Ernest said, "We want peace. By whatever means, we just want peace."

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