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Peacebuilding through non-formal education programmes: a case study from Karamoja, Uganda


Simone Datzberger 

ABSTRACT

Experts increasingly refer to the crucial role of education in cultivating processes of sustainable peacebuilding in conflict-affected environments. While peacebuilding interventions have slowly started to place emphasis on aspects of equality or service delivery in formal education systems, the potential of non-formal education (NFE) programmes to foster social transformation in conflict-affected environments often remains unexploited. There is little research examining how NFE can affect the security situation and peace process in a conflict-affected region, or the role it plays in peacebuilding at large. To address these questions, the article draws on the case study of the Alternative Basic Education Karamoja (ABEK) programme in Uganda. It is based on a multi-track data collection strategy involving visits to learning centres, focus group discussions and interviews with government officials, teachers, youth, civil society organizations and other stakeholders over a period of three months in 2015. The study finds that, despite persistent implementation challenges, ABEK proved to (a) be relevant to the security and conflict conditions in the region; and (b) overcome structural and indirect forms of violence through alternative and flexible modes of education. The ABEK case therefore gives rise to much wider peacebuilding implications and formal education sector planning in conflict-affected environments.

Introduction

Education and peace have been set out in declarations as fundamental human rights. Yet, education has been long treated as an area of development programming which is separate from (post-)conflict stabilization. This trend has been accompanied by a general shift in priority setting among peacebuilding actors towards security-related issues, particularly in the early- to medium-term post-conflict phase.¹ Gradually, scholars and practitioners are succeeding in pointing to the transformative potential of education in conflict-affected environments.² While it is argued that education can foster

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¹Denney, 'Reducing Poverty with Teargas'; Novelli and Smith, *Role of Education*.

²E.g. Bush and Saltarelli, *Two Faces of Education*; Smith and Vaux, *Education, Conflict*; Smith, *Influence of Education*; Bird and Higgins, *Conflict, Education*; UNICEF, *Learning for Peace*; Williams and Cummings, 'Education from the Bottom Up'.

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social justice and build sustainable peace, experts simultaneously acknowledge the fact that the way in which education programming is implemented can also trigger new forms of structural violence.³

Notably, 22 per cent of the primary school-age population and half of the world's out-of-school children (28.5 million) live in conflict-affected countries.⁴ Data from the UNESCO EFA monitoring report further suggest that the proportion of out-of-school children living in fragile environments increased from 30 per cent in 1999 to 36 per cent in 2012.⁵ Clearly, such trends imply the need for both peace operations and long-term peacebuilding interventions to incorporate educational approaches and responses adjusted to the *everyday realities*⁶ and challenges of populations in conflict-affected areas. Yet, the majority of education and peacebuilding interventions remain explicitly and implicitly framed in terms of service delivery and formal, or conventional, educational infrastructures. Critics allege that if education interventions in fragile environments are to have a sustainable impact on the peacebuilding process at large, they have to operate across different sectors embracing processes of social change (thus not only within the education sector) much more.⁷ In so doing, they succeed or fail not only on the basis of their technical quality but also because of a range of political, historical, cultural and economic factors.⁸ Hence, educational programming ideally takes into account the history and specific drivers of a conflict, as well as the cultural, historical, socio-economic and political context of a country or region. In practice, formal education structures are frequently challenged by two main dynamics. First, formal education can also perpetuate indirect, repressive or structural forms of violence.⁹ Second, fragile environments decrease access to formal education leaving a significant number of children and youth out of school. In response to the latter, several non-formal, accelerated or alternative¹⁰ education programmes and initiatives have emerged around the world in order to provide increased access to education. Recent evidence suggests that non-formal education (NFE) programmes can make a clear contribution in providing access to education for populations who may otherwise not have such an opportunity.¹¹ The

³See, for instance, Bush and Saltarelli, *Two Faces of Education*; McCandless and Smith, *The Role of Education in Peacebuilding*; Salmi, *Violence, Democracy, and Education*.

⁴UNESCO, *EFA*.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Cf. de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*.

⁷See, for instance, Novelli and Lopes Cardozo, 'Conflict, Education'; Smith and Vaux, *Education, Conflict*.

⁸Novelli, *Role of Education*.

⁹Novelli and Lopes Cardozo, 'Conflict, Education'; Salmi, *Violence, Democracy*; Bush and Saltarelli, *Two Faces of Education*.

¹⁰The terms alternative and non-formal will be used interchangeably. A clear definitional framing as to how both terms are understood and used is provided in section three: 'NFE in Conflict-Affected Societies and Peacebuilding Interventions'.

¹¹Shah, *Meta-Evaluation*.

benefits and flaws of NFE are not new to education or development experts.¹² However, the role it can play in fostering processes of social transformation and positive peace remains heavily under-researched,¹³ which is counter-intuitive given that a significant amount of NFE is carried out in conflict-affected and fragile environments. In an effort to fill this gap in the research, this study examines an NFE initiative in Karamoja, a conflict-affected region located in the north-east of Uganda. The sub-region Karamoja was chosen as a case study as it represents not only the most impoverished area in the country but also illustrates the intertwined relationship of conflict, ecological degradation, underdevelopment and lack of education. As such, it is extremely vulnerable to internal and external shocks ranging from security, environmental, political and health-related issues. It also displays the highest percentage of Uganda's population with either no schooling or incomplete primary education (79.6 per cent female and 64.8 per cent male).¹⁴ In order to overcome these challenges the Local District Government launched a programme called ABEK (Alternative Basic Education Karamoja) in 1998 as a non-formal approach to provide basic education to children, youth and adults from pastoral communities whose way of life limits their attendance of formal schools. The ABEK approach is distinct from formal education programming in that it embeds education within local aspects of culture, economy, ecology, politics, population and social modes of organization. Almost two decades later, external and internal evaluation reports highlight that ABEK contributed to stabilizing peace and security in the region.¹⁵ Strikingly, ABEK was never explicitly designed as a peacebuilding or peace education initiative *per se*; rather, its impact on the peacebuilding process and security situation in the region occurred as an unintended consequence.

In grappling with how and why ABEK contributed to the ongoing peacebuilding processes and helped to overcome indirect forms of violence, this article seeks to explore the wider implications for peacebuilding interventions and educational programming in post-conflict environments. More precisely, it addresses the following two questions. First, how can NFE affect the security situation and ongoing peace process in the conflict-affected region of Karamoja? Second, what are the implications for peacebuilding interventions at large? In answering these questions, the article draws on a theoretical and analytical framework developed by a research consortium on education and peacebuilding.¹⁶ The framework combines dimensions of redistribution, recognition, representation and reconciliation, linking the work of Fraser on social justice with the

¹²For instance, Shlomo and Schmida, 'Non-Formal Education'; van der Linden, 'Non-Formal Education'.

¹³This point is also made by Shah, *Meta-Evaluation*.

¹⁴FHI 360, *Horizontal Inequality and Conflict*.

¹⁵Manyire, *Evaluation of the Mobile Alternative*; UNICEF, *Draft Report*; interviews with Save the Children Uganda – see [Appendix](#).

¹⁶Novelli et al., *Theoretical Framework*.

peacebuilding and reconciliation work of Galtung and Lederach.¹⁷ It serves as an explanatory tool to critically reflect upon the wider implications for peacebuilding interventions and the role education could play therein.

The article starts with a short overview of the emerging role of education in peacebuilding theory and practice. Section two then discusses the relevance of NFE within both. The ensuing sections revert to the case study of this article and scrutinize how NFE programmes can foster notions of societal transformation and sustainable peace. The concluding section places the findings from the ABEK case into the wider context of peacebuilding interventions at large.

Methodologically, the study is based on a multi-track data collection strategy in Uganda, involving visits to and interviews at ABEK centres, two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with youth in Karamoja, interviews with government officials, civil society organizations, teachers, youth and other stakeholders over a period of three months in early 2015 (see [Appendix](#)). In addition, evaluation reports and education statistical abstracts inform the study's analysis.

Analytical and theoretical approach of the study

Literature is not short on what peacebuilding actually ought to be and mean, to whom, when and why. The normative as well as evidence-based debates revolving around ideal types or revisionist approaches towards peacebuilding (and consequently development) are as longstanding as they are numerous – ranging from liberal to post-liberal, local, communal, emancipatory, hybrid, multicultural or social peacebuilding – to name but a few.¹⁸ Even so, over the past three decades, scholarship, practice, policy making and programming reached consensus on at least two essential elements. First, with the publication of Boutros Boutros-Ghali's landmark document *An Agenda for Peace* (1992)¹⁹ and the emergence of a new United Nations peacebuilding architecture and agenda in 2005–06, peacebuilding became to be seen, and broadly accepted, as closely intertwined with development. Second, the securitization of such peacebuilding and development efforts has been criticized by some scholars and experts, who argue that peacebuilding interventions fail to adequately unpack the mechanisms through which poverty might erupt into conflict and ignore historical, societal, structural, political and everyday realities.²⁰ These debates have hinged on the distinction – coined decades earlier by Galtung²¹ – between positive and negative peace. The latter refers to the

¹⁷See Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition?'; Fraser, 'Reframing Justice'; Galtung, *Peace, War and Defense*; Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*; Lederach, *Building Peace*.

¹⁸For instance, Lidén, 'Building Peace'; Mac Ginty, 'Indigenous Peace-Making'; Mac Ginty and Richmond, 'Local Turn'; Mitchell and Richmond, *Hybrid Forms of Peace*; Paris, *At War's End*; Paris, 'Saving Liberal Peacebuilding'; Chandler et al., *A Liberal Peace?*

¹⁹Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace*.

²⁰For instance, Denney, 'Reducing Poverty with Teargas'; Novelli and Smith, *Role of Education*.

²¹Galtung, 'An Editorial'.

absence of direct forms of violence in a given conflict, whereas the former equates peace with social justice and the absence of structural or indirect forms of violence. As a result, peacebuilding is now by and large approached as a process encompassing a variety of institutional and socio-economic transformations, from the local to the national level, aimed at ensuring social justice, equal opportunity and human security. However, questions remain open as to *how* these ambitious transformations are to be achieved.

In the quest for answers, researchers and practitioners started, among other factors, to explore the role and potential of education as one of many key ingredients needed to achieve positive peace. For example, the Chronic Poverty Research Centre (in collaboration with the Overseas Development Institute – ODI) engaged in research efforts to test the hypothesis whether education is a portable asset helping people to stay out of poverty during conflict and supporting post-conflict recovery.²²

More recently, programmes such as UNICEF-PBEA (Peacebuilding Education and Advocacy) – or UNICEF Learning for Peace – have pioneered with heavy investments in research projects in order to assess the interplay of education and peacebuilding in various contexts and regions around the world.²³ In this endeavour, the argument is not that education is the sole magic bullet for achieving sustainable and positive peace. Instead, education is seen as an important (yet not exclusive or stand-alone) ingredient in fostering social justice and tackling the root causes of a conflict.²⁴ A sustainable approach to peacebuilding, it is argued, places more emphasis on social development and addresses underlying causes of conflict such as political, economic and social inequalities and injustices. In this process, education can contribute to greater security as well as political, economic, social and cultural transformations within conflict-affected societies.²⁵

While education can be part of the solution it can be also part of the problem. For instance, aspects of education which can possibly trigger new forms of conflict may include: uneven distribution of education; education as a weapon of cultural repression; denial of education as a weapon of war; or manipulating textbooks for propaganda purposes.²⁶ Positive effects, on the other hand may include: conflict-dampening impact of educational opportunities; nurturing and sustaining an ethnically tolerant climate; desegregation of the mind; linguistic tolerance; or cultivating inclusive citizenship –

²²Bird et al., *Education and Resilience in Conflict*; Bird and Higgins, *Conflict, Education*.

²³The UNICEF-PBEA (United Nations Children's Fund Peacebuilding and Advocacy Programme) was a USD200 million 4-year partnership (2012–16) between UNICEF, the Government of the Netherlands and the national governments of 14 participating countries, alongside other key supporters. It is an innovative, cross-sectoral programme focusing on education and peacebuilding. <http://learningforpeace.unicef.org/> (last accessed 16 May 2016).

²⁴Novelli et al., *Theoretical Framework*.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Bush and Saltarelli, *Two Faces of Education*.

to name but a few.²⁷ Thus, despite the risk of being misused as a (political) tool to aggravate ethnical tensions and conflict, education has a tremendous potential to nurture and fuel societal transformation from the grassroots to state levels – before, during and after a conflict.²⁸

Against this backdrop, this article draws on a theoretical and analytical framework that was developed by a research consortium on education and peacebuilding.²⁹ The framework combines dimensions of recognition, redistribution, representation and reconciliation, linking Fraser's³⁰ work on social justice with the peacebuilding and reconciliation work of Galtung³¹ and Lederach³² to explore what sustainable peacebuilding interventions might look like in conflict-affected environments. It is argued that the key transformations necessary to produce sustainable peace involve *redistribution*, *recognition* and *representation* (see Table 1). The

Table 1. Analysing education systems in conflict-affected environments using the 4 rs.

<i>Redistribution</i> (addressing inequalities)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vertical and horizontal inequalities in education inputs, resources and outcomes • Redistribution in macro education reforms or policies (e.g. impact of decentralization and privatization on different groups and conflict dynamics)
Recognition (respecting difference)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies on language of instruction • Recognition of cultural diversity and religious identity in curriculum • Citizenship and civic education as a means of state-building
Representation (encouraging participation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation (local, national, global) in education policy and reforms • Political control and representation through education administration • School-based management and decision making (teachers, parents, students) • Support for fundamental freedoms in the education system
Reconciliation (dealing with injustices and the legacies of conflict)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing historical and contemporary injustices linked to conflict • Integration and segregation in education systems • Teaching about the past and its relevance to the present and future • Vertical trust in schools and education system, and horizontal trust between identity-based groups

Source: Novelli et al., *Theoretical Framework*.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Curle, *Tools for Transformation*; Knutzen and Smith, *Uganda Conflict Analysis*.

²⁹Novelli et al., *Theoretical Framework*.

³⁰Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition?'; Fraser, 'Reframing Justice'.

³¹Galtung, *Peace, War and Defense*.

³²Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*; Lederach, *Building Peace*.

framework expands Fraser's approach in arguing that processes of *reconciliation* are key elements of sustainable peacebuilding. These include, among others, taking into account and addressing historic and present tensions, grievances and injustices that underpin the conflict in the first place. It provides a useful tool to analyse the extent to which education is/can support cross-sectoral programming for conflict transformation in terms of redistribution, recognition, representation and reconciliation within the education sector, as outlined in Table 1.

By using the 4Rs as an analytical tool within my case study of ABEK, I refrain from a too deterministic and descriptive application of the framework in order to also ensure awareness of a wide range of context-specific factors or socio-historical dynamics. Instead, I will use the framework as an explanatory tool in highlighting how the 4Rs broadly inter-relate and are reflected within the chosen case study to discuss the wider implications for peacebuilding and education sector interventions. In doing so, attention will be given to crosscutting peacebuilding challenges such as direct and indirect forms of violence in education or gender inequalities.³³

NFE in conflict-affected societies and peacebuilding Interventions

Both alternative and NFE are understood by Coombs et al. as 'any organized educational activity outside the established formal system – whether operating separately or as an important feature of some broader activity, that is intended to serve identifiable learning clienteles and learning objectives.'³⁴ According to van der Linden, NFE also includes non-institutionalized practices, which play an important role in lifelong learning practices, especially in developing countries.³⁵ What is more, alternative education may integrate indigenous worldviews with the demands of global realities at the local level. NFE has, therefore, the potential to meet the diverse educational needs of societies that are impeded or excluded from, or averse to, participating in formal education systems and institutional settings. In practice, following Baguma and Oketcho, alternative education aims at eliminating or lowering illiteracy levels among the masses, combatting regional and gender-based educational imbalances in a nation, uplifting educational standards of in-service personnel (such as teachers), encouraging primary vocational education and training for the poor and low-income masses or enhancing the EFA (Education for All) agenda.³⁶ Programmes are usually put in place to enable children, youth and adults to acquire knowledge in circumstances and

³³Novelli and Lopes Cardozo, 'Conflict, Education'; Salmi, *Violence, Democracy*.

³⁴Coombs et al., *New Paths to Learning*, 10–11.

³⁵Van der Linden, 'Non-Formal Education'.

³⁶Baguma and Oketcho, *Linking Formal and Nonformal Education*.

environments which reinforce unequal access to formal education institutions. Such circumstances may include conflict, a remote locality with weak educational infrastructures (urban–rural divide), refugee flows, biased attitudes towards education, semi-nomadic lifestyles or domestic duties carried out by children that are essential to a family’s survival. As also argued by Shah, even though NFE programmes are frequently implemented in conflict-affected areas, they are usually not explicitly designed to act as catalysts for positive peace.³⁷ Instead they are used as tools to fill the gap in formal education interrupted by conflict.

Although the benefits and flaws of NFE are neither new nor unknown among educationalists or development experts, there is a striking paucity of research on their effects on peacebuilding processes.³⁸ Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that NFE (like formal education) can either enhance or pose a serious risk towards peacebuilding and security in conflict-affected settings.³⁹ A programme’s impact can range from providing education in a conflict-sensitive manner (as later illustrated in the case of ABEK in Uganda) to being misused by military groups to radicalize students.⁴⁰ NFE is very multifaceted and its impact largely depends on the country context, history of conflict and political and religious motivations of its implementers. It is precisely here where this article wants to provide new insights, highlighting persisting challenges, thereby opening up new discussions on how NFE can foster social transformation in peacebuilding processes. In this attempt, it was opted to select a case study that has proven to enhance the security situation and social cohesion in the peacebuilding context of a region. The aim is to illustrate how NFE can contribute in a context-specific manner to peacebuilding interventions at large.

NFE in Uganda

Reverting to the specific case of Uganda, the Education Act 2008 stipulates that ‘a non-formal education means a complementary flexible package of learning designed in consultation with the indigenous community to suit the demands and lifestyles of the community and to enrich the indigenous knowledge, values and skills with particular emphasis to literacy, numeracy and writing skills’.⁴¹

In short, NFE programmes in Uganda are usually put in place to enable children, youth and adults to learn in circumstances and environments which reinforce unequal access to formal education institutions. Such

³⁷Shah, *Meta-Evaluation*.

³⁸For instance, Shlomo and Schmida, ‘Non-Formal Education’; van der Linden, ‘Non-Formal Education’.

³⁹Smith et al., *Integration of Education*, 57–9.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹MoESTS Uganda, *Education Act 2008*.

circumstances, according to the MoESTS (Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Sports), include also conflict-affected environments.

During interviews with officials from the MoESTS and education advisers from CSOs (Civil Society Organizations), the country's NFE programmes were described as being more conflict-sensitive than formal education because of their context-specific nature. The MoESTS currently recognizes five NFE centres and programmes.⁴² All these programmes aim in one way or another to eradicate indirect forms of violence such as inequality or societal marginalization and segregation based on educational attainment and wealth. ABEK was selected as a case study as it not only emerged in a conflict-affected environment but has also the highest NFE enrolment of students in Uganda. Of 27,921 students, 22,362 (80 per cent) are from the Karamoja region in comparison to only 5,559 students (20 per cent) who are from other parts of the country. Thus, in total 16 per cent of all children enrolled in primary education (private and government) are in ABEK institutions in Karamoja.⁴³

Case study: ABEK and its potential to build positive peace in Karamoja

Uganda's history of state formation and the conflict in the northern region has split the nation *de facto* into two countries, if not identities. Since 1986, Uganda has experienced at least seven civil wars, mostly in the northern regions.⁴⁴ More than 20 militant groups have thus far attempted to displace President Museveni's government both within and beyond the Ugandan borders. External diplomatic incidents and/or armed incursions have occurred with Rwanda, (South) Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Somalia.⁴⁵ The most prominently debated conflict in the media, but also in scholarship and policy practice, is the civil war in the north of Uganda against Joseph Kony's LRA (Lord's Resistance Army) since the 1990s.

In 2015, Uganda was ranked 23rd on the Fund for Peace list of fragile states.⁴⁶ Regional instability persists, driven by economic disparities and unequal distribution of wealth, resource competition, land-disputes, cattle raiding, poor governance and democratic deficits, human rights abuses and erosion of civil liberties, lack of truth, reconciliation and transitional justice, the politicization of ethnic identity, the North–South fault line, corruption

⁴²Ibid., 84.

⁴³MoESTS Uganda, *Educational Statistical Abstract*.

⁴⁴Lindemann, 'Just Another Change of Guard?'

⁴⁵Insight on Conflict, 'Uganda: Conflict Profile'.

⁴⁶See <http://fsi.fundforpeace.org/> (last accessed 16 May 2016).

and personal greed, as well as tensions between cultural institutions and the government.⁴⁷

That said, the sub-region of Karamoja stands out for two main reasons. First, it is the most impoverished region of Uganda and remains extremely vulnerable to shocks (security, environmental, political or health) and conflict.⁴⁸ Second, it is home to a pastoralist population from Uganda, Kenya and South Sudan, and clashes within and along these borders continue. Recently, issues of land rights and illegal or exploitative mining activities have threatened processes of sustainable development and peace.⁴⁹ As the head of UNICEF's regional office put it: 'Future conflicts here in Karamoja are about the land, and no longer about the cow.'⁵⁰ Karamoja is located in north-eastern Uganda. Harsh climatic conditions challenge reliable crop production and the population depends overwhelmingly on itinerant pastoralism for its livelihood. Unreliable patterns of rain in past years have led to drought and hunger among the local population. Traditionally, the Karamojong have adapted to these harsh living conditions and environment by focusing much of their energy on livestock – mainly cattle. The search for pasture and water is a responsibility reserved for the men and male youth who move with the herds, often to distant locations across districts. Competition for scarce resources and the high value placed on cattle have produced a culture of raiding and warfare within which men are noted for their bravery and their wealth.⁵¹ Following the end of colonial rule, the borders between Kenya, Sudan and Uganda were redrawn, and the majority of the Karamojong's grazing regions were left outside Uganda causing several cross-border conflicts among different ethnic groups. The extent to which the long-term effects of externally imposed borders have caused civil unrest and conflict in the region remains a highly debated and often disputed point. It is nevertheless important to acknowledge, that in pre-colonial Karamoja, political power was exercised over people and not over land or territory. In other words, the nature of semi-nomadic societal life rendered the whole notion of individual land ownership almost irrelevant. Any territorial claims would have endangered the very basis of survival for most pastoral communities. Starting from the 1970s, Kenyan and cross-border pastoralists (such as the Turkanas or Pokots), acquired modern firearms, which increased the momentum for cattle raiding characterized by violence and loss of life. Forceful attempts by Ugandan governments to disarm and settle Karamojong pastoralists have resulted in decades of conflict, human rights abuses and widespread poverty.

⁴⁷ACCS, *Northern Uganda Conflict Analysis*; Knutzen and Smith, *Uganda Conflict Analysis*.

⁴⁸OPHI, 'Country Briefing: Uganda'.

⁴⁹Human Rights Watch, *How Can We Survive Here?; Datzberger and Malagala, 'Uganda'*.

⁵⁰Interview held in Moroto, Karamoja, 11 Mar. 2015.

⁵¹Närman, 'Karamoja'.

Today, Karamoja displays the highest multi-dimensional poverty index (MPI) in the country: 79.1 per cent live in severe poverty compared to the 38.2 per cent national average.⁵² The region is characterized by several forms of structural violence, horizontal inequalities and unequal opportunities. Karamoja is yet rich in two assets: cultural diversity (consisting of tribes from Kenya, Uganda and South Sudan) and mineral resources. Resource exploitation and land acquisition by mining companies increase structural violence and violate human rights.⁵³ Among other impacts, the poor provision of education for the Karamojong affects the community's ability to advocate for their rights in the face of mineral resource exploitation.⁵⁴ Remote communities lack educated individuals to express their wants and needs, not to mention to engage in lucrative mining activities and businesses for themselves. For instance, during a group interview with 25 members of Nakabaat's impoverished and deeply exploited mining community they were asked how many of them attended school – only one young man raised his hand.⁵⁵

History of educational attainment and intersections with Karamoja's conflict and peacebuilding challenges

Shortly after UPE (Universal Primary Education) was introduced in 1997, enrolment figures in Karamoja were just above 25 per cent.⁵⁶ Almost two decades later, the sub-region has still the highest percentage of Uganda's population with either no schooling or incomplete primary education (79.8 per cent being female and 64.8 per cent being male).⁵⁷ Reasons for low educational attainment are, first of all, deeply rooted in colonial history, which shaped the attitude of the Karamojong people towards education for almost a century. When British colonizers entered the region, they used pen and paper to impose taxes and write down the names of young men to be forcefully recruited for the Second World War. The newly imposed tax system caused widespread poverty and most of the forcefully recruited Karamojong men never returned home. As a result, the pen was cursed and symbolically buried by the local community. Local folklore had it that children who went to a white man's school were destined to die an untimely death. It was not until a cleansing ceremony in 1995, that elders lifted the curse their grandfathers had put on the pen.⁵⁸

⁵²OPHI, 'Country Briefing: Uganda'.

⁵³Human Rights Watch, *How Can We Survive Here?*; Datzberger and Malagala, 'Uganda'.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

⁵⁵Interview held in Nakabaat, Karamoja, 12 Mar. 2015.

⁵⁶Närman, 'Karamoja'.

⁵⁷FHI 360, *Horizontal Inequality and Conflict*.

⁵⁸Focas Licht, 'Alternative Basic Education'; UNICEF, *Draft Report*.

From 1960 onwards, most development projects introduced in the region followed a strict assimilation-through-modernization approach. In other words, education emerged as one of the most essential development tools to bring people out of a perceived backwardness and their simple village life. The aim was to instil modern values and attitudes to transform pastoralists into modern peasants. Education, it was hoped by western donors and local politicians, would convert nomads who were largely involved in inter-community and cross-border competition conflicts over resources, into a settled society. These efforts did not yield the desired results, however. On the contrary, attempts to settle and modernize the Karamojong instead nurtured local resistance and aggravated conflicts as opposed to inducing social justice and sustainable development. Today, climate change concomitant with increased ecological and environmental challenges also fortifies socio-economic grievances among the Karamojong. Notably, research studies found strong evidence that pastoralism remains the most sustainable, if not realistic, means of survival for (semi-)nomadic societies in the East African Region struggling with the consequences of climate change.⁵⁹

This intertwined relationship of conflict, ecological degradation, underdevelopment and lack of education has been often referred to as the 'Karamoja Syndrome',⁶⁰ calling for solutions that fit the everyday realities of a nomadic pastoral community. Almost two decades after its launch in 1998, interviewees repeatedly described ABEK as one of those solutions.

ABEK and its contributions towards positive peace through education

The Local District Government, in collaboration with Save the Children Uganda (SCU), UNICEF and Action Aid, brought the programme to life. ABEK was initially designed as a non-formal approach of providing basic education to children and youth (aged 6–18 years) from pastoralist communities. After a cycle of four years, (P1–P4) learners who wish to do so can be transferred to formal schooling at the stage of P5. It follows an 'open door policy', inviting out-of-school youth and adults to participate in, and be part of, ABEK at any given time. An evaluation report by UNICEF stated that this collaborative participation of parents and their children in a learning activity generated a unique synergy in surmounting previous apathetic attitudes towards education.⁶¹

The ABEK infrastructure is currently divided into 256 learning centres, of which 236 are sedentary and 20 are mobile. Sedentary ABEK caters for children who reside permanently within homesteads. Mobile ABEK centres, on

⁵⁹Oxfam International, *Survival of the Fittest*.

⁶⁰UNICEF, *Draft Report*.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 30.

the other hand, serve children who are in constant movement with animals in search of pasture and water. Teachers usually move with the respective pastoralist community. Both mobile and sedentary centres offer flexible learning hours so that children and youth do not have to compromise their schooling with their roles and responsibilities, such as herding which is a major source of livelihood. That said, there are several features of the ABEK programme that not only suit the population's socio-cultural background and environment but also respond to the so-called 'Karamoja syndrome', which is threatening security and peace in the region. These include the following.

Flexible learning hours and mobile venue

One of the biggest challenges to implementing UPE in Karamoja was to take people away from the activities needed for their daily survival, in order to use that time for studying. In response to these concerns, ABEK sessions were scheduled to suit the daily routines of children in their pastoralist environment. Furthermore, boys are permitted to take books along for studying while driving animals to the grazing fields. This led to the ABEK programme extension of 20 mobile learning centres thereby contributing to the redistribution of education to marginalized societal segments.

Curriculum content and learner-centred approach

'You can't do anything in Karamoja if you don't talk about the cow.'⁶² The ABEK curriculum is co-written by Karamojong and therefore reflects and recognizes many of the economic and socio-cultural needs and expectations of the Karamojong society. The nature of the thematic curriculum is based on learning areas involving culturally recognized topics such as livestock education, crop production, science and environmental management, primary healthcare, food security, local culture – and peace and security. If implemented in an environment conducive to learning, the ABEK curriculum nurtures aspects of positive peace. Implicitly, the learning themes encourage processes of social emancipation and social development. Explicitly, peace education in classrooms raises awareness about cattle raiding, community fights or the consequences of revenge and vengeance. In a survey (N = 225) conducted by SCU, about how children perceived the relevance of ABEK to the security and conflict conditions in Karamoja, 52.5 per cent of all respondents mentioned that they learnt about the negative consequences of rustling and felt encouraged to embrace peace.⁶³ Remarkably, 72.9 per cent of parents (N = 155) noted that ABEK was most relevant in helping children to gain knowledge about the importance of environmental protection, ranging from preserving trees to awareness that planting trees fortifies rain formation

⁶²Interview with SCU, Apr. 2015, Kampala.

⁶³Manyire, *Evaluation of the Mobile Alternative*, 20.

and that trees act as windbreaks. From the perspective of those parents, skills and knowledge necessary to cope with not only the consequences of resource exploitation by external actors in the region but also climate change are conveyed.

Local teachers

As ABEK teachers are usually community based, they tend to know their students quite well. The deployment of local teachers not only strengthens local representation but it is also of particular importance as the Karamojong can easily deny access to their circles. Moreover, using Karamojong people as teachers shrinks parents' general mistrust of education and reluctance to send their children to school. No official statistical data are available on the exact increase of enrolment rates (due to the lack of attendance registers), however, the fact that the number of ABEK learning centres rose from zero to 256 in the last 15 years is indicative of an increased demand.

Addressing gender-inequality in a culturally specific manner

The greatest beneficiaries of this flexible learning model have been female learners. FGDs with youth in Moroto emphasized that married girls and child mothers who could previously not attend school are increasingly receiving education in ABEK centres. Girls with care-giving responsibilities are allowed to bring their siblings to ABEK schools, some of which are concurrently run with ECD (Early Childhood Development) centres. Early evaluation reports conducted by SCU highlighted that 85 per cent of the children enrolled in ABEK were female. Among other explanations found were the fact that the majority of boys had to fulfil their responsibilities in the kraals (cattle camps) located long distances away from home. Besides, once young males are married they are no longer obliged to attend school. Notably, educational institutions and programmes – be they non-formal or formal – can be unique platforms for developing, re-negotiating and reflecting upon identities and deep-seated gendered cultural norms.⁶⁴ As the following section on 'Challenges towards Sustainable Peacebuilding through ABEK' reveals, there are still several challenges to overcome in the case of ABEK.

Transforming child warriors into pupils

The sheer opportunity for children to be able to attend school thanks to a flexible learning model was perceived by interviewees, and surveyed parents, as having increased the security in the region. For instance, a local senior district official pointed out: 'ABEK has contributed to the peace process by taking on these children, the pastoralists, who formerly would not have graduated from school but become warriors. It has helped to break the cycle of child to warrior

⁶⁴Ibid.

by enrolling them to school.⁶⁵ This was also reflected in a survey (N = 155) conducted by SCU in 2011, in which 88.2 per cent of parents indicated that mobile ABEK discouraged children from rustling, whereas 58.4 per cent felt that because of ABEK children and youth no longer participate in raids.⁶⁶ Taking the view that the formal education system would not have been an attractive solution for most pastoralist communities, several interviewees stressed that the sheer option to receive NFE based on a flexible learning model played a very big role in transforming children into agents of change.⁶⁷

Challenges towards sustainable peacebuilding through ABEK

Even though ABEK proved to be relevant to the security and conflict conditions in Karamoja, several forms of indirect and structural violence continue to impede the programme's impact on sustainable societal transformation through education. Concretely, indirect and structural forms of violence lead to the following challenges faced specifically by the ABEK programme.⁶⁸

Persisting security threats

Some serious security concerns and constraints for female children and youth continue to thrive. For instance, once girls approach their teenage years their attendance of a mobile school increases the risks of abduction for marriage. Within Karamojong culture a man is usually expected to wrestle for the woman he is supposed to marry.

Quality of teaching and teachers

One of the biggest challenges ABEK faces is the lack of high qualified and well-educated teachers. Given that teachers are from the community, most of them are either not formally trained or in the middle of their training. To give an example, during an ABEK school visit, one teacher I interviewed could not explain why the institution he worked for was an alternative programme to formal schooling. All the same, more teachers are required to avoid overcrowded classrooms and enhance the quality of teaching.⁶⁹

Weak infrastructure facilities

Shortage of infrastructure facilities (such as boarding schools) and long walking distances still keep many children out of school.⁷⁰ Within the few schools that exist, overcrowded classrooms are the norm and teaching

⁶⁵Interview, Mar. 2015, Moroto.

⁶⁶Manyire, *Evaluation of the Mobile Alternative*, 29.

⁶⁷Interviews with SCU, UNICEF, DEO, LC-5 and MoESTS in Uganda from Mar.–Apr. 2015.

⁶⁸Several interviews held in Karamoja and Kampala – see [Appendix](#); Manyire, *Evaluation of the Mobile Alternative*; UNICEF, *Draft Report*.

⁶⁹Interview with SCU, Apr. 2015, Kampala.

⁷⁰Interview with UNICEF, Mar. 2015, Moroto.

material is scarce. An ABEK school I visited in March 2015 had up to 76 students in one classroom at primary level 1.⁷¹

Lack of donor support and funds

According to SCU, the MoESTS currently provides funds (mainly salaries for teachers) to 209 centres thereby only marginally covering all occurring costs. In interviews with the MoESTS⁷² it was stated that the GoU (Government of Uganda) considers NFE programmes to be a ‘non-funded’ priority given that the MoESTS does not directly fund these initiatives and financial support is purely in the hands of external donors. Even though a policy for NFE has been developed, it remains on the tables of its drafters, as there is no official funding commitment or pledge. Thus, the policy cannot be passed if funds are not secured. As a result, the implementation of NFE programmes relies heavily on the support of INGOs, with SCU at the forefront. In its early stages ABEK experienced significant support but corruption scandals and donor fatigue have resulted in less commitment. Besides, strategies under which the GoU would fully take on all funding responsibilities for ABEK never materialized, with this lack of action based on the argument that more people are now settled than 20 years ago. Yet, interviewees from SCU, UNICEF and the MoESTS stressed the need for continued support for the ABEK system, including in the form of more sedentary centres in areas where communities are now more settled.

Infrequent attendance

Evaluation reports reviewed for this study warn of poor daily attendance of enrolled children and youth. Interviewees pointed out that domestic duties carried out by children are essential to a family’s survival and therefore conflict with school attendance, affecting more girls than boys. It is also no exception that children miss classes because of casual but paid employment to support their families.⁷³ Interviewees further stressed that without ABEK the majority of these children would not have obtained any education at all.

How did ABEK affect the peacebuilding process in Karamoja?

From its very early days, the ABEK educational system was designed and configured by local authorities in a manner to fit a community’s natural and vulnerable environment, both in terms of geography and socio-historical cultural background as well as in terms of people’s everyday needs, challenges and conflicts. In doing so, education was approached as a tool to mix

⁷¹Interview held and school visited in Mar. 2015 Moroto.

⁷²Held in Mar. 2015, Moroto.

⁷³Several interviews held in Karamoja and Kampala – see [Appendix](#).

traditionalism with global norms (e.g. the EFA agenda), thereby creating space for societal renegotiation of the old and the new. In the attempt to educate the Karamojong, the aim was not to assimilate them to a western-induced way of living or modernity but rather to move towards a more locally suited yet transformative approach. This implied responding to persisting conflicting issues affecting the Karamojong society as a whole. Recalling the analytical framework of the 4Rs introduced earlier, ABEK implicitly stimulated and nurtured processes of societal transformation and security stabilization through the following dynamics: first, ABEK widened efforts towards equal *redistribution* in providing marginalized communities with access to education. It contributed to equity and non-discrimination in education access, resources and outcomes for the marginalized and frequently disadvantaged Karamojong. Here, its success lies in the *recognition* of local culture, traditions and everyday challenges that influenced the programme's design, curriculum and structure. ABEK's curriculum shows respect for, and affirmation of, diversity and identities in education structures, processes and content, in terms of gender, language, politics, religion, ethnicity, culture and ability. It further enhanced local *representation* through the involvement of local community members in curriculum design and teaching. In part, ABEK also nurtured processes of *reconciliation* through an open-door school policy that avoids societal segregation and embraces social cohesion, as well as developing relationship trust.

Then again, even the most progressive model to foster notions of societal transformation and peace through education cannot stand on its own feet if it is surrounded by several forms of structural and indirect violence. With regards to the former, weak infrastructures, shortage of funds and no consistent funding strategies or plans towards self-sustainability hamper ABEK's impact. At the time of writing, efforts are currently underway to downsize the ABEK system and increasingly enroll children into formal schools.⁷⁴ Consequently, communities may either not send their children to school, or become less semi-nomadic. In an environment that is highly affected by droughts, famine and resource depletion caused, among other factors, by climate change, it is questionable whether a settled lifestyle is a peaceful and sustainable way forward. Pastoralist communities have been adapting to climate variability for centuries and it is precisely their semi-nomadic lifestyle that allows them to cope with the impact of climate change and resource scarcities.⁷⁵ ABEK could be one way to teach children how to survive in extremely harsh conditions thereby lessening the odds of conflict over resources.

Besides, the quality of the education offered is still too low to truly empower the local population to advocate for their rights and needs in the

⁷⁴Informal interview with a former MoESTS staff and education expert held in Kampala in Nov. 2015.

⁷⁵Oxfam International, *Survival of the Fittest*.

midst of mineral resource exploitation, land expropriation or uneven redistribution policies that may further destabilize security in the region. Additionally, learners are still not in a position to freely move from non-formal to formal education without being stigmatized, in particular when it comes to future employment. The non-formal policy act (which still needs to be passed by parliament once funding is secured) would be one step towards creating an enabling environment for children, youth and adults whose everyday lives limit their opportunities to attain education in a conventional manner. Above all, there are still many children in Karamoja who would benefit from ABEK, in particular those in areas far from formal schools.

Discussion: what are the wider implications for peacebuilding interventions?

With only a few exceptions, the role of NFE in conflict-affected environments has thus far not been subject to a wider debate by academics, practitioners or policy-makers.⁷⁶ In an attempt to fill this gap, there are some general implications and lessons for future research and peacebuilding practice that can be drawn from the ABEK programme.

First, when it comes to long-term peacebuilding interventions, the overwhelming majority of programmes and frameworks still promote a modernization-based development model thereby placing strong emphasis on aspects of redistribution in formal education.⁷⁷ There is an underlying assumption that once issues of redistribution in conflict-affected environments are tackled, processes of recognition, representation or reconciliation will automatically occur. While equal redistribution in the scope of a peacebuilding process is undeniably important, there is a tendency to disregard people's socio-economic problems, cultural values and norms, and how they correlate and historically evolved. For instance, in Karamoja people's predisposition towards education is often described as 'primitive'. But once put into a socio-historical perspective, it becomes immediately evident that such predispositions are deeply rooted in violent events and conflict that occurred centuries ago during colonial times. If modernization-based models to nourish processes of sustainable peace ought to be challenged,⁷⁸ efforts to increase the educational attainment of a conflict-affected population should not emerge as a path for 'them' to become 'us'. Instead, the aim of this article is to illustrate that equal access to education in fragile environments could be enhanced if cultural norms and everyday challenges are recognized and embedded in a programme's design. The case of ABEK strengthens the

⁷⁶E.g. van der Linden, 'Non-Formal Education'.

⁷⁷Smith et al., *Integration of Education*.

⁷⁸Cf. Jantzi and Jantzi, 'Development Paradigms'.

argument that a socio-historical as well as post-colonial perspective matters when it comes to the design of culturally sensitive peacebuilding and development initiatives.⁷⁹

Second, although not explicitly designed as peacebuilding interventions, NFE programmes show great potential to address multiple forms of structural and indirect forms of violence; something necessary for any sustainable peacebuilding project. However, if one positions the role of education in peacebuilding as inherently connected to and embedded within processes of societal justice and transformation,⁸⁰ it has to be acknowledged that their success largely depends on the given resources, infrastructure and quality of the teaching. In short, the political economy context of a region or country cannot be detached entirely from the success of such initiatives.

Third, there is a need to re-think the governance of education and how funds are allocated in countries that transition from conflict to peace. NFE initiatives in conflict-affected regions need to be set up in a way to ensure self-sustainability in the long run.

Lastly, the initial findings of this study have to be placed in a much larger comparative context across different countries, conflicts and peacebuilding settings. Clearly, more research is necessary on whether and how NFE programmes at the regional level address societal transformation and peacebuilding more explicitly than nationwide formal education initiatives. More importantly, what are the implications for formal education sector planning in post-conflict environments? For example, Uganda has one of the highest school-dropout rates worldwide and over one million pupils (roughly 71 per cent) who enrolled in P1 under UPE in 2013 are no longer in school.⁸¹ It is thus worth exploring whether a more flexible learning model in formal education would also lead to lower dropout rates. Ultimately, if the aim is to nurture processes of societal transformation through education in peacebuilding and development-affected countries, not only much higher investments⁸² but also more context-specific, culturally sensitive and creative solutions are needed. Discussions on the limitations of appropriating a western-style educational model to non-western contexts, conflicts and everyday realities can therefore no longer be avoided.

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⁷⁹See, for instance, Chabal and Daloz, *Africa Works*; Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*; Easterly, *White Man's Burden*.

⁸⁰See, for instance, Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; Curle, *Tools for Transformation*.

⁸¹Kagolo, 'UPE'.

⁸²According to UNESCO in 2014 education received only 2 per cent of all humanitarian aid. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002335/233557E.pdf> (last accessed 16 May 2016).

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Appendix

List of interviews

- Visit to ABEK school Moroto, Karamoja, interviews held 9 March 2015.
- DEO, District Education Officer Moroto, Karamoja, interview held 11 March 2015.
- Head of UNICEF Country Office Moroto, Karamoja, interview held 11 March 2015.
- Community in Nakabaat, Karamoja, group interview held 12 March 2015.
- LC-5 (Local Council), District Chairperson for Moroto, Karamoja, interview held 16 March 2015.
- Save the Children Uganda, Education Adviser, Kampala, interview held 2 April 2015.
- Save the Children Uganda, Education Adviser, focal point for non-formal educational programming, Kampala, interview held 8 April 2015.
- Ministry of Education Science and Technology, Policy and Planning Section, Kampala, interview held 31 March 2015.
- Ministry of Education Science and Technology, Head of Department: Special Needs and Non-Formal Education, Kampala, interview held 2 April 2015.

Focus group discussions held on 8 March 2015

Theme: education and livelihood initiatives and agency for youth.

FGD 1 (ten participants: seven male, three female). Age: 22–34 years.

FGD 2 (ten participants: six male, four female). Age: 22–34 years.