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## Meeting Summary: Africa Programme

# Kony's LRA: From Campaign to Policy

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**Anneke Van Woudenberg:**

Anneke Van Woudenberg works as a lead researcher at Human Rights Watch (HRW). She has been working on the questions and abuses of the Lord Resistance Army (LRA) for over 15 years. The discussion began with a brief overview of the Kony 2012 video itself. The video-clip has been watched by over a hundred million people. It was thought to be significant as no other human rights organisation has been able to generate this amount of interest in this way in previous years. It is thought that the advancement of social media is responsible for this mass interest. This mass interest was referred to as a 'potential watershed moment' for advocacy on these kinds of issues. The video itself was 30 minutes long, which is extensive and longer than most videos of that kind. The style of the video was thought to be very 21st century which appealed to a younger generation. Seemingly, the video succeeded in hitting its targeted age bracket. This interest from the younger generation was celebrated as it was thought to indicate increased interest in human rights issues and justice issues. However, the second video was not as successful. This video only attracted 2 million viewers, in stark contrast with the first video. Overall, the method by which Kony 2012 was produced was successful and can be regarded as a watershed moment for advocacy.

This posed the question; does awareness lead to policy change and is there a direct connection? In this discussion, the answer was thought to be yes. Anneke explained that when these issues surface in the media and there is this sort of attention placed on a certain issue, policy makers are more interested and there are increased efforts to tackle complex policy issues when it is more media exposed. However, do these efforts remain sustained? It requires dedication by policy makers to ensure that this momentum remains continual. With regard to Kony 2012, this had several interesting impacts. Firstly, the African Union, who had for some time held discussions about how to tackle the LRA, have become far more active. Secondly, very soon after Congress introduced two resolutions identifying the need for the US government to play its part. The language contained in the resolutions was not new in terms of content but the fact that they were published so quickly rejuvenated interest in this issue. Thirdly, action by the United Nations (UN) was also witnessed. These were not direct actions however, the UN did demonstrate a significant amount and what was witnessed was much greater activity in the UN concerning this particular issue.

Lastly, Anneke addressed the question; where do we go from here? It is problematic that the video itself makes out that arresting Joseph Kony is the solution to ending the LRA. Anneke stressed that it is not that simple and that

a comprehensive strategy is required. Several other key elements were also identified such as, the need for greater protection of civilians in areas where the LRA operate, rescue of women and children, greater efforts to demobilise LRA soldiers and apprehension of the LRA's leaders. In relation to the last point, 3 LRA leaders are currently wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC). It was stressed that there are international legal obligations to arrest them and assistance should be given to the necessary governments to arrest them. It was also stressed that the focus cannot remain on Kony but needs to be placed on all of the leaders of the LRA. Additionally, it was highlighted that these arrests should be lawful and more protection must be offered to civilians. However, the question of who is willing to follow up with concrete actions remained unanswered.

### **Mareike Schomarus:**

This discussion began with questions of the wider implications of advocacy campaigns. Mareike explained that at this particular point we cannot be sure what the impact is as it is uncharted territory. It was noted that there is a general perception that more awareness creates policy. It is sometimes thought that the quantity of people who engage, the better the policy. However, Mareike was unsure as to whether this will make a difference and improve the situation.

However, in this case, the Kony 2012 was thought to be dishonest and played on hidden agendas. The video was thought to have pushed a very out dated and conservative method which lacked any innovation. It was explained that sending in more troops is not necessarily the response that is needed to tackle the problem of the LRA. Mareike explained that where there is more military engagement in these regions, the situation tends to get worse. Past experiences clearly convey this. Military engagement should not be seen as a credible approach to solve the problem of the LRA. Mareike further explained that it was at the point of discussing military intervention where the waters became murky as the situation is far more complex. The discussion once again touched on the issue of civilians and what military intervention would mean for them. It is not as straightforward as bringing troops into a complex political situation.

Mareike stated that the video's overall message to stop Kony was a valuable one. However, Kony 2012 was a clear disregard to local realities and made very obvious statements which are extremely hard to put into long-term sustainable policies. It is problematic because the statements made in the

video were thought to be disconnected from what these statements mean on the ground. This then posed the question as to whether advocacy and policy are compatible and whether it is possible to translate the messages in Kony 2012 into effective policy on the ground? In this case, the reality may be that not going after the 'bad guy' might be the better option. However, it was noted that it will be difficult to bridge the gap between advocacy and policy if activism strategies did take realities into account, it would not be a visible process and would require a lot of painstaking detailed work which people would be less interested in.

Overall, this discussion was concluded with the notion that context is absolutely crucial and there are a host of factors and the problem of the LRA cannot therefore be solved with one solution, as is suggested in Kony 2012. In some cases, it may be dangerous to take simple messages as basis for policy. Further, activists need to be transparent and honest about the contextual landscape they are discussing as long-term change cannot be driven by ideology, it must be driven by reality. In Kony 2012, the death or arrest of Joseph Kony seems to be the solution. However, it was pointed out that in reality, this may worsen the lives of civilians and this need to improve the lives and security of civilians must be the main focus.

### **Louise Arimatsu:**

Louise similarly touched upon the social media aspect of the Kony 2012 video and referred to it as a new phenomenon with unknown results. Louise also identified the dangers of such a phenomenon, although in the case of Kony 2012, it raised awareness, in some cases it can be used as a powerful force to mobilise people. The Arab Spring was used as an example to illustrate this dangerous aspect. Louise explained that social media sanitises war and simplifies complex issues. This generation of social media creates this need for immediate responses to problems. Louise explained that it is this which triggers a disconnect between what the younger public want and what they are demanding from the political elite. These demands from the younger public are simply undeliverable.

With regards to policy options, Louise commended the many initiatives at international, regional and sub-regional levels. Firstly, there have been military operations happening at all levels – regional, international and between states. Secondly, there has been a program in place to facilitate defections of fighting that have been part of rebel groups. This process of reintegration is absolutely crucial. Thirdly, there have been significant efforts

at international level in terms of international criminal prosecution at the ICC. However, at the domestic level there have been significant problems. Uganda introduced the Amnesty Act of 2000 which undermined the whole process which has been set up in order to prosecute. Under the Amnesty Law about 20,000 LRA people have been given amnesty. This is seen to be hugely problematic as international law does not recognize amnesty when it comes to serious international criminal offences. Conversely, this could be perceived to be a good thing as some of the LRA members have joined the UPDF and are assisting the Ugandan forces to capture Joseph Kony and some of his associates. Thus, there are positives to the process at domestic level.

There have been significant problems between states. Uganda, the Central African Republic, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo have had heavy handed military operations ongoing. The US sent in advisors, particularly with intelligence and advisors, in order to gather intelligence. These military operations can be conducted with minimal impact to civilians.

The African Union has taken the lead in wanting to coordinate and help to address this regional programme because of the border. Louise stated that it is far better for regional people to deal with these issues rather than at the international level. In addition, the UN have made more of an effort, particularly in the last 18 months. They are now coordinating and information sharing far more than ever before. This is a significant advancement as the UN have identified the lack of coordination and attempted to rectify this.

## **Discussion Points**

### *The LRA:*

At this point in the discussion, it was raised that the LRA have a degree of uniqueness. It was stated that the LRA have no voluntary recruits, they abduct children to part-take in their activities. This point was contested later to say that there are some voluntary members. However, it was agreed that Joseph Kony is unique in the sense that he is a cult-like figure. He has a distinct ability to control rank through this kind of cult-like activity. This is unique for armed forces where people are spread out in a vast area.

In order to totally diminish the LRA, it is important to target not only Joseph Kony but the entire LRA leadership. It was stated that it was important to keep in mind that military operations does not just mean collateral damage. It was suggested that the Juba peace talks between the Government of Uganda and

the LRA did not result in less violence in Uganda. One speaker disagreed with this statement but argued that they in fact brought peace to Northern Uganda. It was later raised that these talks were not meaningful in relation to the peace process because there was a significant amount of back-door dealings. It is this lack of transparency which we want to avoid in the future. However, there was further disagreement on this point, another speaker contended that the Juba peace talks were successful in achieving peace in Uganda.

*To what extent do the LRA pose a threat today?*

Another point that was raised was that if this particular group were not called the LRA and they didn't have a macabre history, nobody would be talking about this because they are currently of strategic irrelevance as there are a significant amount of other armed groups who pose more of an immediate concern. In addition, Operation Lightening Thunder in 2008 aimed to eradicate the LRA. The operation was successful in doing so. However, it was questioned why the LRA are being elevated to the level of public discourse when they have reduced significantly in number. This was followed by a comment questioning the role of the LRA in South Sudan and Northern Uganda and how significant will the LRA be in the situation heating up in South Sudan and Sudan? It was noted that in March 2009 the LRA conducted a military operation and it was successful with about 500 components in the LRA at the time.

However, this is not a significant number in comparison to other rebel groups. Following this, a comment was made in response quoting the then Secretary General, Kofi Annan, who stated, 'the threat that the LRA poses should not be assessed on its size or military capability, but on the scale of the attacks it has carried out against civilians and the humanitarian and human rights consequences'<sup>1</sup> It was noted that the LRA are not a threat for Northern Uganda but they are a threat for the civilian population in the Central African Republic. Although the LRA are weaker than ever before, there is cause for concern as to whether Khartoum (the only state sponsor in the past) will sponsor them again. Although Operation Lightening Thunder was successful in terms of achieving its aim to scatter the LRA. It was disastrous for the civilians. The long-term effects of this operation were not considered. The displacement of the LRA impacted civilians for many years after. Therefore, its aim to make life better for the population failed as the long-term displacement

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<sup>1</sup> [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full\\_Document\\_33.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full_Document_33.pdf)

was difficult to manage. This question was raised as to how do we achieve this greater protection for civilians in the areas where the LRA operate?

*Kony: Dead or Alive?*

The discussion then focussed on the likelihood that Kony will be killed, prior to his arrest. It was thought that an order may be issued from the Government in Kampala as the possibility of Kony ending up in the ICC may be controversial. Uganda has a bloated military and they will be very hesitant to allow those involved to go to the ICC dock revealing the happenings in Uganda. In response to this comment, it was raised that the ICC has no enforcement mechanisms and that these arrest warrants have been outstanding for many years. The International Community is keen to see the LRA leadership in the dock at the ICC – this will send an important message for transitional justice. Further, the need for these arrests to be done in a lawful manner was stressed. Operation Lightning Thunder, which slaughtered many Congolese civilians, demonstrated the need for these arrests to be carried out in accordance with international law.

*Where do we go from here?*

In the early 90s, in Uganda, there was a very active policy of amnesty and this had a considerable amount of success. There was peace in Uganda for a short period. It was raised that if there was a prospect of amnesty and resettlement and if this could be made meaningful, this could be the best chance of resolving the problem. Further, the discussion then focused on the usefulness of the ICC in this context. It was stated that the international community have shot themselves in the foot with regards to ICC. It was thought that trying to bring about peaceful negotiations is incredibly difficult with someone you are trying to arrest. It was argued that what is needed is a forceful programme of amnesty and resettlement. To this, a speaker responded that the Amnesty Commission still exists in Uganda today. However, this has not been effective in enticing members of the LRA in recent months at all. The exact numbers of the LRA are unknown however there are now many in their ranks that are Sudanese, Congolese and from the Central African Republic. However, there is a clear desire to keep the group as a Ugandan force as they are forced to speak Acholi, a language spoken largely throughout Northern Uganda.

In response to these points, it was raised that it is abundantly clear that the LRA would not be as popular without this social media campaign. Although, once people were made aware that Invisible Children was thought to be an evangelist group who had a connection to the Uganda anti-gay bill, their popularity was certainly in question. It was suggested that the LRA would probably be far less interesting without the myth that has been developed around them.

The problem of the Kony 2012 video is that it sent very mixed messages and put the LRA in the media spotlight. The video triggered tensions between what was expected and what is needed on the ground. The problem of the LRA needs to be addressed with a broader approach with attention to local political dynamics. Further, the importance of transitional justice must not be forgotten and what is needed is appropriate mechanisms to hold those responsible to account. This tension between peace and justice has always existed. It was commented that those responsible for the gravest atrocities must be held to account and in this case it is not simply Kony that is responsible. Evidently, in this case, the domestic mechanisms are not appropriate or effective. It should be noted that Uganda itself referred the LRA to the ICC. Uganda cannot go back on this decision, once again, it is important to adhere to international law. The ICC cannot simply revoke the arrest warrants, as this would set bad precedent. This could otherwise extend to situations such as Libya.