Reviewer's report

Title: A Cross-sectional Study of Factors Associated with the Social Well-Being and Mental-Health Status of Former Abductees of the Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda

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Reviewer: Emilio Ovuga

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Introduction: The paper presents the results of a community survey in eight districts of northern Uganda to determine the nature and types of violence that former abductees of the Lord's Resistance Army experienced. The main outcome variables of the survey, however, were post-traumatic stress disorder and depression among the former abductees. The paper provides available evidence for the prevalence of 'post-traumatic stress disorder' and 'depression' in a region ravaged by more than twenty years of a brutal fighting involving the rebel army and the Ugandan military.

Title: The title that appropriately describes the content of the paper would be: "The Social Well-Being and Mental Health Status of Former Abductees of the Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda".

Abstract: While the types of violence that former abductees experienced was the main subject of the survey; the authors did not include this in the abstract. The abstract is wordy and should be shortened by half without loss of the message of the paper. Examples of how to achieve this are illustrated throughout the paper with strikethroughs of words of whole sentences that are inappropriate or unnecessary.

Text: While describing the mental health status of the respondents, it is more appropriate to refer to "probable post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)" and "depressed mood" as the instruments (scales) employed in the study were designed to screen and not to make clinical diagnoses. In line with this critique the words probable PTSD and depressed mood are suggested instead of PTSD and depression respectively in the review of the paper.

Bias: The researchers introduced a serious systematic bias without telling the reader the female to male ratio of interviewers on the assumption that women needed to be protected from sensitive issues. However Ugandan females tend to confide in and disclose more intimate information to males who are sensitive to issues of human sexuality. A second bias was the inclusion by the researchers of 12 respondents whose forms were "incomplete"; and no further information is provided to justify the inclusion of the 12, or the anticipated magnitude of error in the content of the paper and how they minimized this. The authors should also tell the reader the inter-rater reliability of data that the several interviewers
gathered. The explanation that the researchers used the same instruments before in previous research in Uganda is not a justifiable assumption that systematic errors and bias are avoided.

Ethical clearance: It appears that the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) did not grant national clearance for the researchers to carry out this community study. It is not sufficient for local governments of respective districts to grant permission as many of the officials that might have been approached lacked the necessary knowledge, skills and experience to evaluate ethical issues involved in research in northern Uganda communities affected by war. Local governments are only part of the series of agencies for researchers to approach; ordinarily it is the UNCST that introduces researchers to local government officials where community-based research is to be conducted anywhere in Uganda.

Comments: The findings of authors are similar to the observations of Ovuga et al [1] among former child soldiers at a primary boarding and rehabilitation school in northern Uganda. Children who reported more experience of traumatic events while in rebel captivity were more likely to report symptoms of depressed mood, as were male and older children in the rehabilitation section of the school, and those who returned to their communities via any of the several reception centers that were established to enhance their reintegration into their respective communities; the staff of most reception centers had no specific training to recognize, assess and diagnose clinical depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, and refer them for specialized mental health care. The implications of these two reports appear obvious; the reintegration and community-led mental services in northern Uganda require an integrated and comprehensive psychological, mental health and social services delivery that involve communities, political leaders, traditional social structures and mental health care providers in the reintegration of former combatants from both sides of the conflict into their communities.

Limitations: While the authors acknowledge limitations that might affect the quality of their findings, the report provides useful information on the quality of life and experiences of former combatants in any armed conflict, organized violence, political terror, war and domestic violence. The interested reader will find useful account for more information in Herman [2].

Recommendations: Despite the non-approval of this research by the UNCST, I recommend the paper for publication because of the potential value it has for improving the care and reintegration of former northern Uganda combatants back into their communities. The authors should, however, respond adequately and satisfactorily to comments and queries that have risen in the paper and be prepared to conduct of future research in Uganda after the UNCST has cleared them. I recommend that the authors shorten the paper as illustrated by the strikethroughs and deletions.
Reference:
