

## UGANDA

### **Enabled and empowered: a 'child mother' returns home in northern Uganda**

Reunited last year with her family in Amuru District with the help of UNICEF's implementing partner World Vision, Sarah (not her real name) may be one of the lucky ones.

A 17-year-old former child soldier, abducted by the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) when she was seven years old, Sarah was able to return home when the father of her child, an LRA officer, who abducted her when she was in the second year of primary school, accepted to release her because she was pregnant. Her brother was also abducted but it is believed that he died while still being held captive.

Where such a release is said to be rare, and escape rarer, Sarah can talk with hope about resuming her schooling one day, even as she earns a small living as a tailor to fend for herself and her son.

There are hundreds of documented cases of children abducted by the LRA during the course of the 20-year armed conflict in northern Uganda, forced into combat, heavy manual labour and – in the case of girls – sexual slavery. Information provided in district government registers and records maintained by the numerous community-based reception centres – which provide initial family tracing and psychosocial counselling, with UNICEF's support, to formerly abducted children as soon as they return – indicate that the numbers could be as high as 25,000 children abducted since the mid-1980s, including approximately 7,500 girls.

For Sarah and other formerly abducted children and young persons who return to their families in northern Uganda, UNICEF has been promoting and supporting their long-term reintegration based on the acceptance of the communities of origin. The approach involves the open participation of community members as a key element in strengthening the protective environment not only for returnees and their families, but also for the community as a whole. Communities address stigmatization, limited economic viability and other common challenges faced by formerly abducted persons – including children and women – and look together for solutions to reduce their vulnerability.

More than 2,000 formerly abducted children have been reached in 2007. Key allies in this effort have been community-based organizations like Empowering Hands, a peer-support group established in 2004 by formerly abducted individuals themselves to organize village discussions; awareness-raising about the plight of the formerly abducted through music, drama and dance performances; and income-generation activities for group members.

Sarah belongs to the Empowering Hands' music and dance troupe in the Amuru camp. They perform regularly at weddings and other community gatherings. Earnings from each performance go to a revolving fund that enables group members to start income-

generation projects. Sarah says that her involvement in Empowering Hands has made “life much more bearable because I see the possibilities”.

“Placing the centre of support squarely on community members is essential to giving the formerly abducted their lives back and, in many cases, their childhood,” says the head of UNICEF’s operations in Uganda, Keith McKenzie. “Without this strong sense of ownership, one squanders the opportunity for children and young persons, our most precious resource, to grow up in a climate of peace and tolerance.”

“The ultimate aim of a stable reintegration,” adds McKenzie, “must go hand in hand with the right of all children not only to protection, but to good health and basic education, with community investments in ‘the whole child’.”

Back in her home, made of hardened mud with a thatched grass roof, Sarah says that her most immediate concern is for her son and the future she wants to shape for him. A future in which the flashbacks and nightmares she experienced upon returning home must have no place.

“I am angry at what happened because it should never have happened,” she says softly. “I would like everyone who can do something about this war to bring it to an end.”

A wish of a child and mother who endured the unspeakable, working to leave the experience behind on the path to recovery.