

Stories of change and testimonies

4. Stories of change

1. Irwata Peter – Kalapata subcounty, Kaabong district (before)



Irwata Peter - front, right narrating his story

Irwata was nicknamed Lokirikaku – meaning the one who always returned with something whenever he went to raid cows. He was one of the most experienced and notorious raiders in his sub county – a sub county known to be one of the conflict-hotspots in the district. He would mostly raid the neighboring Jie community in Kotido district, Turkana (Kenya) Didinga (South Sudan). He was the leader of the raiding group in his community. He and other youth would obtain guns through buying in neighboring South Sudan at UgX260, 000 (approx..\$70.27). “We would also get guns from the victims we attack or soldiers we kill”. Some of our colleagues would borrow from the cowards who had guns but feared to use them.

He narrates how they would plan raids as a group of about 63 youth. After planning they would visit a seer/witch doctor who would direct them where to go and attack and kill whoever they come across. He narrates that “in case of an attack on our community, we would organize revenge attacks and kill them and take animals and divide what we have raided”. He adds that “Unfortunately, the family of those who would die in the raid would not get anything”.

According to Irwata, the trigger was the gun. “With a gun, you would feel powerful and fearless, you would move anywhere and revenge when raided”. He also attributes raiding among the youth to bride price. “When you become a youth, you know very soon you will be needing animals – say 100 for dowry”.

Irwata recalls his worst day when he survived death, they attacked a Kraal in Naporoto, Turkana county in Kenya. “Out of 63 warriors, 16 of us were killed during that attack”.

Now

Irwata, a former cattle raider who commanded cattle raids, escaped death while witnessing many of his friends being killed. He was both a perpetrator and victim of violence. From champion of violence, he has now become a champion of peace. He testifies that “In the whole of Kaabong District, I used to be the number III commander in raiding. I am now the number I commander of peace in my community. The project has been a life savior to me and to many others who used to be like me. Through the project, I realized I was on a path of death. Indeed, most of my friends died during the raids we commanded”. He leads a group of fellow young people in Kalapata subcounty called Naporoto peace champions in preaching peace and carrying out income generating activities like goat rearing and art and crafts materials. Irwata’s number one mission as learnt from his experience is the change of mindset as a key strategy to realizing peace in Karamoja region. Watch more about his amazing journey of change in the project [video](#) and stories of change document.



Irwata wearing a “tie” he made from beads with word a “peace champion” (left). (Right) Irwata conducting community sensitizations against raiding and gun violence

Waiga Rashid (before)– Yumbe district



Waiga Rashid - right

Waiga was abducted in Lodonga subcounty – Yumbe district and taken to Rojo in Sudan (now South Sudan). He became a child soldier of the defunct UNRFII (Uganda National Rescue Front II). Waiga was among the 135 child soldiers of UNRFII. He spent 3 years in the bush as one of the rebels. CECORE

participated in the pre-negotiation process and later a peace agreement was signed in 2000 with the government of Uganda. By the time of the agreement, Waiga had been promoted to the rank of Sergeant (within the UNRFII).

Waiga and his fellow former child soldiers say, “we were abandoned, neglected and forgotten”. Their concerns included missing out on the promises and package promised under the agreement. “And yet we had missed education”. He tried reporting the concerns to Uganda Human Rights Commission and Amnesty Commission but is yet to be supported. He feels frustrated. He has formed an association of UNRFII former child-soldiers consisting of 48 members and intend to mobilize members to carry out income generating activities like welding, farming, goat rearing and poultry.

Rashid (now): A former child soldier of UNRFII (Uganda National Rescue Front) rebel group who got frustrated by the outcome of the Peace Agreement, instead of reverting to violence, he mobilized 48 of the 135 former child soldiers of UNRFII to establish a group that focuses on building peace and income generation. The group is called UNRFII former Child Soldiers. Today the group conducts peace sensitizations about peace in Yumbe. Through another groups affiliated to UNRFII Former Child Soldiers peace group (Barakala City football club), Rashid has coordinated the group and initiated sports for peace activities in Yumbe and the rest of the West Nile region. He has also mobilized the Barakala City members and cultivated 7 acres of sunflower and vegetables.



Rashid holding vegetables from the 7-acre sunflower garden that the UNRFII/BK group has cultivated

The story of the six 6 Royal Guards – Kasese district

In 2016, Kasese district experienced brutal violence between the government armed forces and the youth loyal to the *Omusinga* (the cultural leader of the Bakonzo in Kasese district). In the process, these youth were accused by the Government security forces of being a militia – referred to as *Kirumira Mutima*. The youth are said to have attacked military installations in Kasese district and killed 4 security

officers. One of the retaliations by the military resulted in attacking the palace of the cultural leader and killing of close to 100 people loyal to the king and arresting of the king. Today tensions remain high in the district. During one of the engagements between the project team and the Kasese district chairperson, he remarked “we

must work never to see such an incidence again. For example, burying 52 in one day after two weeks was the worst incidence in my life”.

CECORE caught up with 6 of the royal guards who survived. They stated that they had worked as royal guards for 3 years. “We had been deployed in village deployment sites of chiefdoms and so the armed clash involving the Uganda armed forces (Police and Army and royal guards did not find us in Kasese town when the king’s palace was attacked”.

After the clash between the royal guards and the government armed forces, they say they experienced a lot of harassment, and that the community members were very suspicious of them. They faced arrests and say many of their colleagues are still in detention centers while others are in hiding for fear of arrests. We were 46 in number including 3 women. At the moment, we are 6 including one lady who, due to the ordeal she has gone through cannot afford to return to the home village. “When we went back to the RDC and LC V Chairperson to report back our ordeal we were instead advised to form a SACCO so that we could be helped”. The group had not yet formed one but had a name already “Yes We Can”.

Katya (one of the members): Katya was part of the members involved in the 2016 insurgency in Kasese (against the Government), he mobilized his fellow insurgents into peacebuilding through a group called “Yes We Can”. This group is now collaborating with the local government to preach peace and prevent the possible re-occurrence of conflict. The group now has a welding workshop as an income generating activity for members.



CECORE Executive Director – Rose Othieno (second from right) with some of the members of Yes We Can" at their workshop in Kasese. Katya is extreme right

Other stories:

Afande Natasha: Lopeyok Benjamin, aka Afande Natasha – says he used to be spoilt and notorious due to drug abuse and influence of growing up in a violent culture. Today, he is part of St Monica Murukomuria Peace entertainment. He is using his talent of music to sensitize communities and fellow youth to promote peace and abandon violence. He has produced a number of peace songs.



Patrick Bwire (left) ifa-zivik project Coordinator with Afande Natasha

Jessica - Kathile Peace Champion group -Kaabong: Jessica, a victim of early forced marriage, suffered domestic violence - Thanks to the project, she gained skills, financial independence, and is now recognized as a peace leader in and beyond her community.



Paul Tanya – Kathile, Kaabong district:



Tanya is one of the warriors that Kathile peace champion group reached out to and convinced to abandon acts of gun violence. Paul imitated acts of cattle raiding from his father who was a raider like other raiders in his community. He started by accompanying his father's group for raiding at 12 years by carrying for cattle raiders food while on mission. He would be given one cow after each successful raid. At age 15 "I said to myself, why don't I get a gun and acquire more cows instead of getting one?". Tanya later got a gun and started raiding, causing road ambushes and other forms of violence. He survived several bullets and has a number of scars of gun shots. In one of the nasty incidences where most of his colleagues died, he survived by hiding in a hole for 2 days. Today, Paul has transformed, joined the Kathile peace champions group reached out to convince many of his colleagues to abandon raiding and plans to go back to school. He is thankful for the Kathile peace champion group for rescuing him into a free world where he now feels at peace and not leaving in fear as before. Find more of his story in the [video](#)

Moris¹ – Kasese district. Moris was a commander in the Uganda army (UPDF). "I was duped into joining the forces against the government with motives like....". I became one of the commanders of the insurgency forces. In fact, the day the government forces attacked the palace, I was lucky I did not die among those who were there. I had gone to train some of my colleagues. Today, I am grateful to the project. I learnt, I had been misguided, but what is most important is that I have learnt to change myself and many of my colleagues into embracing peace in my community. Although some of the colleagues are still hesitant to join the peace efforts – citing fear and unfulfilled expectations from government, many are willing to join.

Highlights of testimonies/quotes:

1. I have grown up in a family characterized by domestic violence. My parents would fight almost daily and the fight would affect us children which also led to many of us dropping out of school. After the training as a peace champion, I talked to my parents and explained to them the challenges related with their fighting and how it has affected all of us as a family. My parents appreciated the need to live in peace. For the last six months, my parents have not been violent and have not fought. They have even enrolled my young sister and brothers who had dropped out of school. Noted Kevin from Kaabong.

¹ Not real name – for security reasons

2. "I grew up in a good family, but later joined my peers who introduced me to raiding as a business. Whereas it was profitable, the challenges and risks were not worth it. On several occasions, I sustained injuries from bullets and at one time I was arrested by Uganda People Defense Forces. Upon my release, my father had died who would have supported my education. I dropped out of school in senior three and had no money to go back to school. I am happy that with the coming of CECORE, I attended a series of trainings that changed me to a peace champion. I no longer engage in raids and most of my peers who were in that business have been killed while others are in prison for the same offense. I am happy when I stopped raiding and started promoting peace, my life is changing. I have visited some of my colleagues who are still in prison and encouraged them to reform". As narrated by Paul – Kathile, Kaabong.
3. "The project has enabled me to realize my potential as a peace maker as well as challenged me to play my role as a mother. Before the project, I would leave everything to my husband including providing for the family. This would make my husband fight me every day for not providing food and preparing children for school. After the training I have realized my mistakes, asked my husband for forgiveness. We have not been violent for the past three months and I strongly believe the trend will continue even after the project". Noted by Masika, a peace champion in Kasese.
4. "I had wanted to join the peace champions group at the beginning of this year but was denied by my husband. Later my friends talked to him and he accepted that I join the group. My husband is now happy with me because I have a business of firewood, I also buy coffee and many ladies are admiring me. I have also learnt how to weave, and I have learnt a lot of things that have been supported and I no longer look like a woman with 6 children but I feel I am becoming a youth again". As narrated by Jovia from Kasese
5. I used to be a lazy woman, who had lost hope in life. My husband had also lost hope in me and was almost getting another wife, but when I joined the group, my self-esteem was boosted, I realized that I can do a lot for my community. As a peace champion, my fellow women have requested me to represent them as a district female councilor from Aliro Sub County, narrated a 23 year old Wagaimo – Kei, Yumbe
6. "Before I joined the peace champions group, I was at war with my co-wives. We would fight almost on a daily basis. With skills from peace building and especially the need to become a role model, I started by requesting my co-wives for forgiveness, which they did not take as serious, but when I stopped the fight, whenever they would fight, they would all come to me for counseling and support. Whereas I am the youngest wife, I have contributed to peace in our home. Our husband is now happy with all of us because we no longer fight". Noted by Zulaika – Yumbe
7. "I used to fight with my husband over lack of soap. Now I no longer fight because I can afford through the proceeds I get from the project" – a peace champion in Mahango.
8. "We used to use 1 sewing machine that we would borrow from a Mzee in the village. We would make 5 clothes (garments) a week, now we can make and sell 30 – Bwesumbu peace champion group
9. "I am extremely happy about youth groups. I offered my land to the group for free as it has a productive sense of focus, hosting the project we all know the value of land participated in fencing. What the group is doing is inspiring development in my area". Noted LCI Chairperson Ombia – Yumbe.
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11. "Youth are no longer idle in the communities, they have embraced on work and are engaged in different activities" – Community Leader – Mahango, Kasese
12. "After the training in IGA, Kinyamete has more than doubled its production and sales of garments. The group has even got contracts to supply school uniforms to schools like Busara Hill school" – Group leader – Kinyamate I peace group - Kasese
13. BK City FC through its boda-boda project earns us UGX 40,000 (\$10.8) per day and we save UGX 25,000 (\$6.8) as a net profit from each motorcycle – Group members UNRFII/BK City peace champions group – Yumbe
14. There is a big reduction of crimes in my community since most of the youth are now working. The increase in income has proved to serve as an alternative that has driven youth from criminal activities to productive activities – Leader, Barakala - Yumbe.
15. "The relationship is now okay. They (peace champions/former warriors) are now the ones helping us to address and report cases of violence" – Community leaders – Kaabong.
16. Most of us and other youth had lost hope in our lives after dropping out of school with no skills to engage in any income generating activity. The hope is now back" – youth member – St Monica, Kaabong
17. Much as I was a woman, I was the one coordinating raiding. I would organize the raids, prepare food and take for them in the bush, and keep coordinating them while in the bush. On return, I would organize fellow girls to welcome back the raiders. After the peacebuilding skills I got from CECORE, I now mobilize girls to go to school and do business.