

Independence Brought by Everyday Activities and Self-Esteem

Efforts of Terra Renaissance

Terra Renaissance is a certified NGO based in Japan that has been working in Northern Uganda since 2005. It has supported the social reintegration of 251 former child soldiers. When I visited their base in Gulu city, young people from the 11th intake I saw males learning furniture making while females were learning sewing machine maintenance.



Female beneficiaries learning how to maintain sewing machines

Since the late 1980s in Northern Uganda, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), an anti-government organization, and the government army have been engaged in combat. During the internal conflict the LRA abducted over 30,000 children and forced them to fight with guns on the front line of the battlefield.

After the ceasefire in 2006, the security situation in Northern Uganda improved, and people gradually resumed their former way of life. However, the social reintegration of former child soldiers, who bear significant physical and mental scars, has been extremely challenging. To address this, Terra Renaissance launched a social reintegration project with the goal of enabling former child soldiers to acquire necessary skills for social reintegration within three years, achieve economic independence, improve relationships with local residents, and live safely in the community. In addition to vocational training such as sewing and carpentry the project also provides living support to enable beneficiaries to focus on vocational training, as well as basic education and microcredit for independence after graduation. They also conduct peace education and individual counseling through traditional rituals and cultural activities eg songs and dances. According to Mr. Suzuka, who guided me, the most effective counseling for those with trauma is "usual everyday activities, like sharing meals together."

Furthermore, Mr. Ogawa, the representative of Terra Renaissance, has analyzed the project's activities and compiled his findings. He discovered a significant correlation between the "degree of independence" and "self-esteem." Additionally, "self-esteem" was found to be derived from beneficiaries' acts of "contributing to others,

including family and relatives." This revelation underscores the intriguing insight that while "independence" and "connection with others" may at first seem to be opposites they actually exhibit a strong correlation.

Interestingly I realized that the impact of these "everyday activities" and "self-esteem" spurring the independence of former child soldiers has also been observed in the JICA Northern Uganda Farmers' Livelihood Improvement Project, in which AAI has been involved since 2015.

While some former child soldiers are among the target farmer groups supported by the project, the project does not specifically identify them. However, there was a moment when a young man stood up on the final day of one training session and said, "I want to say something." He then revealed that he was a former child soldier and said, "Through the project activities, I learned techniques, cultivated vegetables, and earned money together with other group members. Finally, I was able to gain confidence in myself." Upon hearing this, I realized how meaningful it is for people with trauma to spend ordinary days and collaborate with others.

Currently, we do not use the term "former child soldiers" in the project. According to national staff, "They are already members of the community, so there is no need to further identify them." However, according to Terra Renaissance, the LRA has not been dismantled, and there are still around 10 returnees annually. It would be good if the region became peaceful and everyone could stop recalling painful memories. On the other hand, I realized that I had casually regarded the internal conflict as "the past" and was ashamed of my own thoughtlessness. After witnessing Terra Renaissance's activities, which have continued to support the former child soldiers for 17 years, I was once again impressed. We at AAI also will continue working for the peaceful days of the people of Northern Uganda with Terra Renaissance as good neighbours.