
A Conversation with Victoria Nyanjura and Emma Okello

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *Thank you both very much for chatting with us today! Given that you both do work that can be, and has been, described as development, I'm curious as to how you personally define development.*

EMMA OKELLO: Development is moving from a bad scenario to a better situation. In Uganda, infrastructure like public transport, roads, and education are improving. Nonetheless, some people are still left behind. For example, if you go to government hospitals, there is no medicine and some people are dying giving birth. Things are especially bad in villages. So, for me, development is about progressing from one step to another.

VICTORIA NYANJURA: To me, development is about people having the opportunity to meet their basic needs, such as enrolling their children in school, traveling safely to the hospital, getting medicine, having food to eat, etc.

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *How does development incorporate human security's emphasis on individual freedom and equality of opportunity? What is the significance of those things to you?*

Victoria Nyanjura is the founder and executive director of *Women in Action for Women*, a nonprofit that supports women survivors of conflict in Northern Uganda by providing business skills enhancement and vocational training. Since her return in 2004 from forcible abduction by the Lord's Resistance Army, Victoria has emerged as a prominent women's activist in Uganda's transitional justice deliberations. She has received numerous international awards, including the 2019 Ginetta Sagan Award, for her work coordinating the efforts of over 500 war-affected women to provide inputs into the Ugandan government's post-conflict policy and program.

Emma Okello is a safeguarding officer at *Gulu Disabled Persons Union*, a nonprofit based in Gulu, Uganda that empowers people with disabilities to live dignified lives. She graduated with a bachelor of community-based rehabilitation from *Kyambogo University* in Kampala, Uganda.

VICTORIA NYANJURA: Human security is important to me as a person. To me, human security means speaking up in the face of injustice, as well as the opportunity to socialize and to network for jobs. Human security is so important because if somebody has the freedom to do different things, then they can more easily assess their opportunities. Development can easily work when people feel safe. When I don't feel safe, I'm not able to participate in anything that would promote my development as a person. If you have your freedom, then you know what is right and what is wrong, so you can advocate for opportunities that you think you deserve or would work well for you. And you can also work toward the betterment of the community. For example, I am only able to advocate on behalf of other women who are survivors of sexual violence and abduction because I myself feel safe.

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *So, if I'm understanding you correctly, you're drawing a distinction between survival and development. In order for someone to have freedom of opportunity, they first need to be or feel safe from imminent threats. Is that correct?*

VICTORIA NYANJURA: Yes, I agree. From the perspective of survivors, people who are not safe will not express themselves. More practically, human security enables people to physically move safely from one place to another, which we were unable to do during the war between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda.

THE FLETCHER FORUM. *That makes a lot of sense. Emma, what are you thinking?*

EMMA OKELLO: Development can only occur once a basic threshold of human security is met; without security, development cannot happen. Human security is important because everyone needs protection from the government. During the war, government soldiers committed many crimes and failed to protect people from the LRA. When you have security, you are free. For example, when we had the war in Northern Uganda (I was really young, but I still remember everything), everyone was running around; people were insecure and dying of hunger. In that kind of environment, development is impossible.

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *I would like to shift slightly to focus on the International Criminal Court (ICC) and particularly the trial of Dominic Ongwen, a prominent LRA commander. As you know, in May 2021, the Trial Chamber pronounced individual sentences for each of the sixty-one crimes for which Mr. Ongwen was convicted, sentencing him to twenty-five years of imprisonment. How has the trial changed things on the ground in Gulu, if at all? Do you think that reparations are an important aspect of post-conflict development and transitional justice?*

VICTORIA NYANJURA: Many people in the sub-region feel that Ongwen should never have been sentenced because he was abducted when he was young. They believe that whatever he did was what he was forced to do. For his own survival, he had to comply with the rules and regulations within the LRA setting. However, I believe that the trial is important because it acknowledges the harm suffered by survivors while providing accountability. Additionally, it has a deterrence effect in that people around the world learn that they may at one point be held accountable for their actions. If nothing is done, then the ICC's purpose is meaningless. Personally, I think that the trial is important because it establishes an objective record of what happened. Had Ongwen not been taken to the ICC, I don't think that international attention would still be on the war and its legacy.

Regarding reparations, the process on the ground is just beginning. In fact, I've been invited to a discussion on reparations in New York in April. So, that means that we women are able to get reparations, but reparations have not yet been paid. It's going to be a process.

Turning to the domestic level, there is only person, a former LRA commander, who is currently being tried at the International Crimes Division of the High Court of Uganda. So, people continue to talk about what LRA commanders did and the need to hold some of them accountable.

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *Do you think that reparations are important?*

VICTORIA NYANJURA: As a component of the trial, reparations are very important. During the ten years that I have worked with survivors, they have wanted their lives to return to what they were before abduction while feeling that their suffering has been acknowledged. Reparations may provide healing for survivors because they feel that they have a legal right to it as a result of the violations that they have suffered. So, from the perspective of the majority of victims and survivors, reparations are a key component of their healing.

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *To clarify, did any of the women in Women in Action for Women (WAW) submit applications for individual reparations?*

VICTORIA NYANJURA: I know that there are few organizations in Uganda and around the world that submitted applications, but we did not. But I've always been invited to attend meetings where reparations are being discussed. In those meetings, they explain who is eligible for reparations. They include those within the Ongwen camp after 2002, such as those within the Sinai Brigade when Ongwen was commander. Others may not have been abducted, but they may have suffered, such as those who lived in Lukodi, Pajule, and Abok. All of Ongwen's women and their children qualify. I'm not sure if they're going to define it in a different way again, meaning that those who do not fall under the court's definition of "victim" are going to be left out from receiving reparations.

EMMA OKELLO: To jump in with a personal anecdote, when I'm walking around, I hear people talking about the Ongwen trial. Communities are not happy about the crimes Ongwen committed because people lost their loved ones and things were destroyed. Some people are saying that Ongwen should be forgiven because he did things when he was really young. So, I think it's complicated. And as Victoria said, many people lost their properties, and something really should be done for them. In addition, some people are still traumatized and they need psychological support. So, the ICC is a very sensitive matter for victims and survivors. They don't feel okay. They're not happy. I think something should be done to help them individually. I don't know how reparations will reach the victims, because at least everyone in northern Uganda has been affected directly or indirectly, myself included. It wasn't a very easy period for me; I was really young and had to sleep in the bush. I felt incredibly insecure that I would get abducted. I passed the night in the bush and then I would have to go to school while navigating roadblocks. The war was not a good thing — it was a real threat to everyone in northern Uganda.

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *Victoria, as you noted, at the ICC, reparations are tied to Ongwen's criminal conviction. But, you both note that the situation as a whole caused tremendous amounts of suffering. I'm curious what you both think the role of the government should be in issuing reparations. What should the government be doing in terms of post-conflict reconstruction?*

EMMA OKELLO: The government failed to do something to stop the suffering during the war. I feel like the government did not protect the citizens of northern Uganda from the LRA.

VICTORIA NYANJURA: When people were returning from captivity, NGOs offered immediate support to returning victims. They built hospitals and schools so that people could get back to something. But, the Ugandan government also introduced several development programs to support the victims and community members as a whole. Schools and hospitals were built by the government under the Northern Uganda Reconstruction Development Program. Recently, the government unveiled a parish-development model in which they give money to parishes to support people who aren't necessarily victims or survivors of the war. In 2015, survivors petitioned the government to develop a comprehensive plan to address the suffering that different people underwent during the war. Around that time, the government began the process of drafting a national transitional justice policy. Reparations is one of the components of that policy, along with truth-telling. The document is currently being finalized by the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs. If it comes to pass, victims and survivors' prayers would be that it's implemented because the government consulted with victims and survivors, so the policy is responsive to our needs.

EMMA OKELLO: The government should really do something for its people in the way of protection. The government needs to learn because the war can repeat itself and there should be a better way of finding peace so that others don't suffer the way we did. There should be prevention measures to prevent another outbreak of war in the country and to ensure that people don't suffer in this way again. Some people are still living with bullets in their bodies and need to be operated on. There also need to be programs for psychological support along with data collection to track the people who need that kind of support. Right now, some people don't even have a place to stay; imagine: you've come back with a child, you have nowhere to stay, your parents are not there, you don't even know where you belong. Take for example Ongwen's wives — they're really suffering: they went to farm in one of the sugarcane plantations when they returned from the bush and some people said, pointing to one of their children, "look at that one, that one is Dominic's son. Have you seen how the boy resembles the father?" Even today, people continue pointing at them. They cannot be free.

VICTORIA NYANJURA: I've seen this very thing that Emma is describing happen myself. I think that NGOs and the government should have worked together to create a mental health center. Many can physically walk around but are not well mentally. When you can't afford to feed yourself, when

your kids can't go to school — that's when mental health deteriorates. A social center within walking distance where people who have suffered various harms can access the different services they need (i.e. counseling, physical therapy, etc.) should be a priority in a conflict setting because state of mind is an important thing. I also think that economic empowerment is very important. When people are busy, then their minds are occupied. I think that in a post-conflict setting, there is a need to think beyond six months to five, ten years. If we provide for education, then people will be more employable and more capable of creating their own jobs, which will allow them to meet their daily needs without much struggle. It is thanks to my education that I am able to purchase phone space for this interview.

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *Thank you both very much. f*