



Violence, disease and poverty ravaged the Ugandan district of Katakwi for decades. Now, after a period of peace, communities are returning to the area to rebuild – and schools are leading the march of progress. David Rosenberg reports

United to learn

Like many young people, Joseph, Patricia and Juventine enjoy listening to music and playing football and volleyball. At school, Juventine likes English and maths but dreams of playing the keyboard professionally. His classmates at Magoro Primary School aspire to be teachers, nurses, engineers, doctors and lawyers.

But if Joseph, Patricia and Juventine succeed, they will have overcome extraordinary circumstances. They live in the troubled district of Katakwi in north-east Uganda, and for more than two decades the region has been plagued by terrifying raids by armed gangs who carry out indiscriminate rape and murder among the local population and steal the cattle on which they depend for their livelihood. According to the Foreign Office, "lawlessness... is endemic", "tribal

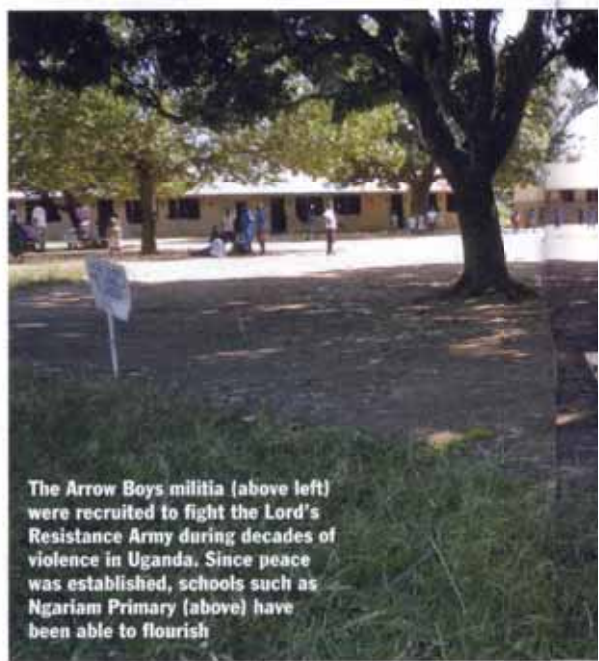
clashes are frequent and unpredictable" and "deaths or injury from gunshot wounds occur regularly".

For many Ugandan children, simply being able to go to school is a major triumph.

The landscape of Katakwi is markedly different from much of the rest of Uganda. Maize fields, banana plantations and thick pine forests yield first to sparser vegetation and then to flat swampland where little can be cultivated, although young men fish optimistically.

Grass-thatched homes are claustrophobically huddled together, grey stony hills dot the landscape and the cattle outnumber people.

It is noticeably hotter, too. Dry seasons here can last five months of the year, so families depend on cattle sales to supplement subsistence farming.



The Arrow Boys militia (above left) were recruited to fight the Lord's Resistance Army during decades of violence in Uganda. Since peace was established, schools such as Ngariam Primary (above) have been able to flourish



Before Uganda introduced free primary education in 1997, most Katakwi children could only go to school if their family sold enough cattle to support them. Many children, girls especially, went without.

And for two decades starting in the mid-1980s, villages across northern Uganda suffered terrifying raids by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), who seized possessions, raped girls and women, indiscriminately murdered parents, and abducted youngsters to use as prospective child soldiers.

When the LRA reached Katakwi in 2003, they struck new fear into communities already long traumatised by similar armed raids from their Karamojong neighbours whose livelihoods, like theirs, depend on cattle.

Villagers died defending their families from cattle raids. Joseph, now 15, was six

years old when his mother was widowed and left to care for six children. He remembers: "My father was killed and my mother had a problem feeding her children. She looked for work cleaning and labouring."

Patricia's father met a similar fate when she, too, was very young. "The Karamojong took my father and killed him. Then they removed all the food from our granaries," she says. "They left only my mother to care for us. We did not have enough money even to buy school books."

Angered by the government's piecemeal response to this terrifying situation, some locals created their own armed rebel movement. Many more people fled their homes to regroup in more than 50 internal refugee camps, mostly centred around schools.

The impact of the violence on schools ➤

was dramatic. Some teachers fled, while others were afraid to leave their homes. Schools functioned with skeleton staff and were valued more as temporary shelters than as centres of learning.

Peter Okello, a teacher at Magoro Primary, recalls the dangers of working: "During this time, people lost their livelihoods but we got paid, so we were vulnerable to being robbed."

Before teachers could start their lessons, they had to remove the refugees who had sought shelter in the classrooms. They then had to take their classes while trying to ignore the stench of urine.

Some children missed schooling completely during this period because they were working to support their impoverished families. Those children who attended school became drawn into fights for scarce resources, mimicking behaviour they had witnessed in camps.

Robert Imongot, a fellow teacher at Magoro Primary, recalls: "The children lost hope and their morale deteriorated. They became rude, chaotic and wild." Pupils were also exposed to beggars, criminals and HIV victims at school, he says.

Such experiences occurred throughout Katakwi. Stephen Aloko, who chairs the School Management Committee (SMC), was a victim of a Karamojong raid. "They took all our valuable possessions and then abducted myself, my wife and my child, just three years old," he says.

"We thought we would all be killed, but they took pity on us and allowed us to return."

Makeshift refugee camps provided safety, but overcrowding compromised health. At Ngariam Primary, there was just one borehole for water and a few latrines serving 2,000 families. Malaria and typhoid were rife.

Troops were deployed to protect the camps, which reduced the threat of Karamojong raids, but some soldiers took advantage of girls desperate to obtain necessities such as soap. Early pregnancies soon cut short their schooling.

The army eventually quelled the insurgency, but the disruption to education and the demoralisation of teachers and pupils endured.

"There were high drop-out rates for girls," recalls Margaret Ikulot, Katakwi's secretary for education. "Headteachers were running away from their responsibilities and communities did not know how to support their children at school."

Today, most families have returned home to rebuild their lives, and schools



are reverting to their prime purpose. Once renowned for high standards of English literacy, during the insurgency Katakwi's schools languished far behind less troubled regions in Uganda's school league tables.

However, there has been a marked improvement in recent years. Across the district, the number of pupils achieving first-grade passes in the primary leaving exam more than doubled between 2005 and 2009. The number failing, or not attending altogether, fell from 15 per cent to 6 per cent. More and more Katakwi children are progressing to secondary schools, and girls who have fallen pregnant are encouraged to continue their studies.

Education here has also been strengthened by the intervention of Link Community Development (LCD), a non-governmental organisation that has worked within Katakwi's education department since 2006, training teachers, headteachers and educational administrators and promoting schools as centres of their communities.

Hellen Aguti, who co-founded LCD's Katakwi project, knows what it means to

struggle for education against the odds. She was 12 when her father was murdered in a Karamojong raid. Her brother then financed her secondary school education until he, too, was killed in a random ambush by local rebels.

Given the traumas of the past two decades, Ms Aguti says it is not surprising that education became a low priority. "They were traumatised, and thinking about day-to-day survival," she says. But she is convinced that the successful resettlement and reconstruction of villages hinges on community participation in schools, especially in the face of a new, and equally dangerous, threat.

As global warming brings more extreme weather conditions, Katakwi is experiencing longer droughts and heavier floods, which threaten food security for resettling families.

During the insurgency, the UN World Food Programme provided many pupils with school lunches. When peace was established, the programme withdrew, but today many schoolchildren will once



Katakwi's secretary for education Margaret Ikulot (below) is proud of the effect that school has had on pupils like Patricia (main picture) and Juventine (above right)



We empower each other. We go to the field together, we move together as a team and we share the challenges

charitable trusts, the Baring Foundation and the John Ellerman Foundation, LCD has enabled these schools to procure hoes, cuttings and seeds for sweet potatoes, cassava and bananas.

The aim has been to establish school gardens both as a source of school meals and an educational tool, with children and adults learning self-reliance. So far, 26 of the schools have established gardens and, in 24 of these, community groups – trained by LCD – are planting crops with the children.

In tandem with Katakwi's education department, LCD is also putting schools through a rigorous performance review to assess their strengths and weaknesses and highlight their development needs.

In addition, headteachers and one senior teacher from each school are sent on a 10-day training programme to address issues such as how to resolve conflicts and sustain peace, gender equality, nutrition, HIV/Aids, and promoting sport and recreation. This training also involves developing a "child-friendly school" and a health promotion action plan.

Ms Ikulot is enthusiastic about her department's partnership with LCD. "We empower each other," she says. "We go to the field together, we move together as a team and we share the challenges." As a

result, she says Katakwi's schools can at last look forwards rather than backwards.

But progress can sometimes be a double-edged sword. As peace and resettlement in Katakwi increase enrolment, many schools are struggling with a lack of sufficient space, furniture or textbooks for pupils. Katakwi schools have no electricity and many have no water source. Ngariam Primary's dilapidated classrooms with semi-constructed walls and cracked, worn-out blackboards are barely adequate. At Magoro Primary, more than 1,000 children occupy seven classrooms. In Year 5 alone, there are 175 pupils to one teacher.

Despite these difficulties, there are significant achievements. Girls now outnumber boys in Magoro Primary's top class preparing for secondary education. A display on one classroom block declares: "Girls can do it!"

Teachers at Magoro Primary are also regaining their self-esteem. Mr Imongot, who began teaching in 1976, admits that there were times when it was hard to see the point of education. "Some of us wanted to be soldiers rather than teachers during the time of the insurgency," he says. But now he regards his profession as "the builders of the nation".

His colleague, Stella Onyang, says morale is growing all the time. "Teachers don't grow old, they remain strong," she says. Mr Imongot has high hopes for Joseph, Patricia, Juventine and their classmates. "I want them to become the teachers of tomorrow – our future leaders," he says.

There is a long way to go, but at last there is reason for hope.

● To find out more about the work of LCD, visit <http://lcdinternational.org/>



again have to make do without lunch. LCD is leading a four-year project to address food insecurity in schools, while assisting resettlement and enhancing the quality of education.

The project is targeting the 27 schools that were most affected by the Karamojong insurgency. With grant support from Comic Relief and two