

TRANSFORMATIVE SPEECH: KUOL AND SPEAK UGANDA

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When does hope become fragile? So fragile, that even the slightest glimpse of it hurts to bear. So fragile that it takes an entire community to hold onto it. For someone like me, I could only imagine the disastrous conditions one would be in to live in such a circumstance.

"Instead of people focusing on the negative stories, how can they transform these stories to something positive?" - Kuol Arou Kuol

First things first, let's introduce Kuol. His full name is Kuol Arou Kuol, and he's from South Sudan. He's also a refugee in Uganda, but despite his limiting conditions, he is leader and co-founder of SPEAK Uganda (primarily engages in resolving regional issues within South Sudan), and Action for Rural Transformation (both of which are



groups that actively engage in peacebuilding). Recently, he also represented displaced youth in a peace agreement of South Sudan, which was done in Ethiopia.

In my opinion, his quote reflects – for lack of better terms – a very great sentiment. Importantly, it's a sentiment that many cannot believe. But for others and himself, Kuol does. And SPEAK Uganda follows right after him.

The Way of The Past

How far ahead into the future can your background decide? There are two sides to this debate. One side says that no matter how hard you work, no matter how hard you try, you'll always be limited by the system you started in. In some instances that could be economic disparity, maybe it could be an abusive environment. This side says you won't really escape it, no matter how hard you run.

But the other side specifically focuses on the “really” and says, “hey, no!”, and though maybe it isn't as simple as that, it sure as heck sounds like it. Crucially, the fact that they're able to focus on the non-definite part of the statement is what leads to their success. Sure, backgrounds affect your future, but they may not set it in stone. With the right people and the right help, it doesn't have to be something that ties you down. Kuol proves that true. He was a former child-soldier. That speaks a lot about the person he has become, and the work that he does.

It's a complicated situation to be honest, child soldiers that is. We see using children as a source of labor – especially dangerous forms of labor – to be unethical and immoral. And that pretty much holds true for much of the world, maybe even the recruiting parties themselves. And if we saw it happening, we would try and stop it. But they can't.

From The Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, child soldier recruitment is not only problematic, but also persistent. In Africa, around 118 million children live in a position where ongoing conflict surrounds them, making about 1 every 6 children vulnerable to recruitment.

This problem persists because of the constant competition between African states, whether that be violent or non-violent. Some children view joining a group as a path to escaping their living conditions. But not for long. The harsh reality is that militant groups exploit and manipulate these children, viewing them as “human bombs.” Just a tool in a big toolshed.

Fortunately, communities are fighting back. The U.N. for example plays a critical role. They've established international regulations such as Article 38 which says that individuals cannot take part in armed conflict until the age of 15; moreover, they've also provided support through funding such as UNICEF.

But the U.N. can only do so much, and though massively influential, there still lies room for added support. The second piece of the puzzle? NGOs or non-governmental organizations, and that's exactly where Kuol and his team come in.

The Way Forward

Kuol initiated because he wanted a way for people to open up and interact with each other. "We started as a story group that was helping, especially former child soldiers, to come together and to share stories, to be able to cope with the experiences that they have been through in the refugee camp."

These groups consisted of people from multiple different cultural backgrounds, and what began as a story-telling group became a community that is remarkably diverse and incorporating. Reflected through their registration in 2018 and everything before that, Kuol and SPEAK put great emphasis on one thing: dialogue.

To him, first-hand experience reveals what happens when negative assumptions become a cycle. Ideas are passed down from generation to generation, leading to frightful misconceptions with no intermediaries to correct them. "They don't get a chance to live with those people to really experience the human kind of value with those people, other than what they are being told." It is this disconnection that fuels the very misunderstandings that start these conflicts in the first place.

SPEAK stands as a necessary gap filler, identifying issues at the local level and encouraging sustainable initiatives rather than one-time benefits. "It's a huge expectation that conflict will be solved at one go or in a specific period. It doesn't work that way sometimes. These conflicts are deeply rooted."

Unfortunately, this corrosive cycle also draws the younger generation in – "young people are being used to advance the old people's mindset" – but that doesn't mean that they aren't fighting. "It takes another young person to see things differently, to change a mindset"; and that's exactly what's happening. The youth within the region are learning and challenging established traditions with their own unique views and perspectives. Slowly but surely, Africa is changing.

But specifically, how does SPEAK facilitate this?

- **Peacebuilding:** They established the Centre for Mediation and Conflict Transformation. Mediators, a part of the Centre, advise communities on how to approach certain conflicts.

- Livelihoods: SPEAK also equips local farmers and fishermen with “essential tools and skills” to help their trade. With this support, they can earn sustainable incomes and live a healthier lifestyle.
- Climate Smart Agriculture: South Sudanese women conjoin to share beneficial agricultural practices; additionally, they discuss harmful stereotypes and share their personal experiences with each other to form a safe and healing space.



The memo: don't let your background hold you back (they don't define you!). Change your past mistakes into educational lessons. Remodel internal suffering into meaningful conversation. And if you see someone else lose their path and hesitate – whether that be a country or the people that surround us – remind them that they can transform too.

“I have faced a lot of things that I can't undo, but the only thing to live on is to try to make some positive contribution. Whatever happened cannot be changed, but there is more that we can do that can help people not to go through that same experience. That's where we get the significance. That's where we find peace.” – Kuol Arou Kuol

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CITATIONS

Ramdin, A. X. (2024, February 25). Why child soldiering persists in Africa | GJIA. Georgetown Journal of International Affairs. <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/human-rights-development/why-child-soldiering-persists-in-africa/>

Speak. (2018). Speak. <https://www.speak-peace.org>

BBS & SPEAK Uganda Working Together

BBS has worked with SPEAK Uganda on a number of initiatives that reflect SPEAK's focus on skills development, livelihoods and economic opportunity as practical ways to strengthen communities and contribute to peace.

Through a train-the-trainer program delivered by Hindura Recycling Initiative (HRI), a social enterprise in Kampala, BBS supported SPEAK Uganda staff to learn how to teach women and girls to sew and care for their own reusable menstrual pads. The program gives SPEAK's team a practical skill they can share in the communities where they work.

BBS has also expanded its microbusiness incubator to South Sudan, with support from the Tinagri-Silverton Foundation. Implemented through SPEAK Uganda, this initiative provides women with training, mentoring and repayable loans to start or expand small businesses, including enterprises in the dried fish industry. As loans are repaid, the funds are passed on to another group of women.

Threads of Transformation has also taken root in Uganda through a new initiative with SPEAK Uganda. Women have worked with designer Saskia Lenaerts to repurpose materials, including transforming strips of military garments into reusable shopping bags. The initiative combines creativity, skills development, environmental sustainability and opportunities for women to connect across communities. The next phase will focus on traditional crafts, which play an important role in the culture and traditions of South Sudan's different clans. BBS and SPEAK Uganda will explore how these activities can create economic opportunities while bringing women from different clans together to build relationships, understanding and trust.

Moving forward, BBS will continue working with SPEAK Uganda on the Threads of Transformation crafting initiative and the Food for Peace initiative.

You can support the Food for Peace initiative in the Adjumani Settlements and bring together refugee and host-community women to improve food security, develop livelihoods and build stronger relationships across communities by donating through the link below.

[Support Food for Peace through BBS](#)