



**A new expression for new problems:
Exploring the Karamojong language for clues about climate related risks and alternative,
unsustainable survival strategies in North Eastern Uganda**

Summary

This brief provides unique insights into how drought-affected pastoral communities in Karamoja, Uganda perceive the concepts of risks and resilience, and what strategies they apply to survival. Based on a survey exploring language and expressions used in Karamojong (the language for the majority of the population in Karamoja) it shows how people in this region struggle to survive with their predominant livelihoods being threatened by climate change and exclusion through new words and expressions collected in the area. The survey was conducted between August and September 2018 with 128 respondents (60% male, 40% female) from vulnerable pastoralist communities.

Most survival strategies of drought affected Karamojong communities were reported not to be sustainable and have significant social, economic and environmental impacts on their communities and the country at large. Strategies include the (illegal) burning of wood and cutting trees for charcoal and firewood which affects the environment negatively and destroys the ecological system.

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Key considerations and recommendations

- Reviewing changes in the Ngakarimojong language of respondents highlight that many communities in Karamoja struggle to survive; their historical livelihoods are being threatened by climate change and social exclusion. As such, pastoralist communities in drought-affected Karamoja should be supported to adopt more sustainable resilience mechanisms.
- Increased investment is needed into employment opportunities in the region to avoid people resorting to dangerous income gaining strategies, including mining, sex work, illegal burning of charcoal or selling alcohol. Gendered differences in terms of risks need to be further explored.
- Members of parliaments of Karamoja region should table bills to the speaker of parliament that specifically discuss issues related to resilience, e.g. sustainable agricultural mechanisms and improving pastoralism in the region. These bills should not only be drafted but also enforced with programming and support flowing out of these bills.
- Government must act against charcoal burning. The existing policy – The National Forestry and Tree Planting Act, 2003 – mainly focuses on conservation of forests, not the rangelands. Government should pick up on research finding to inform its policies and ensure charcoal preservation laws are also enforced in rangelands.

Background

Karamoja is a region that has suffered social, economic and political changes since the start of disarmament which was successfully conducted in 2006. The region has been severely affected by



drought such that its population has been living in a constant state of crisis¹. Average monthly temperatures in Karamoja have increased over the last 35 years and rising temperatures will impact households directly through the increased frequency, intensity and duration of heat waves and reduced water availability. Rising temperatures will also detrimentally impact agricultural and livestock production in the region, exacerbating food insecurity (GoU, CGIAR and World Food Programme, 2018). As such, most Karamojong have traditionally depended on migratory rearing of cattle, a livelihood which is now also proven to be challenging as cattle breeders have to walk increasingly far to find drinking water for their cattle and green pastures for their cows to graze on. This is particularly difficult during certain times of the year. Unlike most of Uganda, which has two distinct rainy seasons, Karamoja has historically had a single long rainy period between April and November² and this period has become ever shorter (Climate Risk Screening for Food Security Karamojong Region, 2018). The dry season lasts eight months a year, and it is very difficult for the locals to grow food on the land during that time.

This area is not only suffering from climate-related challenges but also has a collective trauma related to the war. Most people have lived through decades of inter-ethnic conflict and suffering climaxed after disarmament in 2006. Not all the tribes in the area were fully disarmed and some groups continued to attack their now-defenceless neighbours carrying out rape, torture and murder. Even the act of disarmament itself was traumatic for the people in Karamojong, with the army behaving in a brutal way during this period. Additionally, post-disarmament, the loss of guns meant that many men lost their livelihoods and had to resort to alternative livelihood strategies. Men felt vulnerable as they could not hunt to provide for their families nor protect their families from external attacks.

As a result, it became the responsibility of the women to forage for food for her husband and children, which is still happening now. The Karamojong culture is very male-dominated and the drought affects (single or widowed) women the most: they are unable to own land, resources, or sell household property to cater for other pressing needs. Instead, they are “*taken in marriage in exchange for cows*” to become their husband’s “*property to use as he pleases*”.

Methodology

The brief is based on a language survey conducted in Karamoja, Uganda between August and September 2018. It aimed to explore whether the Karamojong culture has concepts relating to resilience in any of its definitions and how people perceive the concept of resilience in their own lived realities and language. Our findings are based on focus group discussions carried out in Lorengedwat, Namalu, Acholi Inn, Lokopo and Iriri in the districts of Moroto, Napak, Nakapiripirit and Nabilatuk. The team conducted 16 Focus Group Discussions of two hours with adult (middle-aged) men and women.

Findings

¹ A crisis or shock is defined as an event or events that destabilize the livelihoods of a population. A humanitarian crisis is defined as an event or events that pose an exceptional and generalized threat to the health, safety, wellbeing or subsistence of a population. This phenomenon can have either a slow or rapid onset, be acute or chronic, and be either natural in origin (e.g. drought) or man-made (e.g. conflict) (or its causes can be attributable to both natural and man-made factors) (Chi et al., 2015).

² Rainfall peaks during April and May, with a break typically in June. Rains then return in July or August and continue through November. Annual average rainfall ranges between 300 mm in the pastoral regions to 1200 mm in western areas of Abim and Nakapiripirit. Average annual temperatures range from 16°C in the highlands to 24°C in the rest of the region.



The research highlighted that the term ‘resilience’ was used by respondents in Karamoja to describe the survival of most of the population and the durability for aspects in their culture in the face of regular and massive shocks. The research set out key shocks as identified by the communities that were existent in local language spoken in communities. The language survey highlights that Karamojong cultural norms and cultures relates to resilience which can be explained in words like *Aoote*, *Eboot*, *Ebooking* and *akiyek enyota*, which are new words that were recently introduced to the language:

- *Aoote* – is a widely used word by Karamojong people in poverty-stricken communities which refers to survival migration strategies. Young girls and boys move to urban towns like Jinja, Kampala, Busia among others to look for *aoote* – work that will allow them to survive – for example through begging (from strangers or relatives), working as maids, etc. Through *aoote*, girls, boys and young mothers travel to places like Kampala to beg and they are prone to sickness like typhoid due to lack of hygienic water to drink, HIV/AIDS due to rape from gangs in the streets and many other diseases.
- *Eboot* – is also a newly introduced word used by communities to refer to “the need to spend time in the bush to carry out charcoal burning”. As agriculture and cattle rearing is becoming less profitable the preferred way to earn an income is to cut down trees in order to burn charcoal to sell. This makes the already extreme weather conditions worse and results in life becoming even more difficult. This often takes the charcoal farmers days in the forest before the product is ready for sale.
- *Ebooking* – seems to be derived from the English word meaning “booking” but in this case it refers to when men and women from the villages move to peri-urban centres to get local brew at slightly cheaper prices and take it to the villages and resale. People buy or credit from the sellers to go and resale to get profits which helps them to support their families. Although *ebooking* has been a term that has been used more frequently, it was usually only women who undertook it as an activity. What makes it unique now is the involvement of men in the activity that was formally predominantly done by women. The word is now very common in Moroto and in Napak the same phenomenon is referred to as “*buze-out*”, borrowed from an English word. (buying or crediting local brew from a someone so that you can resale and get little profit) but has the same meaning as *ebooking*.
- *Akiyek Enyota* – is a word use to describe the process for unsustainable artisanal mining. This is a rare word in the Ngakarimojong language. This activity is not secure but people reported they would prefer doing it rather than staying at home. A report recently released in Kampala notes that many small scale miners are not registered by the Uganda Registration Service Bureau (URSB) which leaves regulation of sales unmonitored, and as such miners can easily trade on the black market. It showed, for example, that 98% of Karamojong who mine gold in Amudat, Nakapiripirit and Moroto districts would exchange one gram of gold for a five-litre jerry can of waragi, a local type of white strong spirit, and other household items. It also highlights extreme inequality: “These people are facing acute hunger. Many of them have resorted to eating Aloe Vera because of lack of money and food yet they are dealing in one of the world’s most expensive minerals,” the report reads in part. The sanitation at the mining site is also deplorable - miners report having to trek more than 15 kilometres in search of drinking and cleaning water (2018).



The above explained, new livelihood strategies are now culturally integrated but are not sustainable and have social, economic and environmental impacts on the communities and the country at large. For example, the burning of bushes and cutting of trees affect the environment negatively. A natural resource officer from Moroto explains that the impact of the continued clearance of trees in Karamojong is already manifesting through the changing weather patterns:

“In the past, this region would receive rains from March to May, before a short dry spell sets in. Then rains would resume from August to November. Lately, we can even enter May without rains. The result is frequent famine”. He does report some suggestions for change: *“Compared to the other districts in the sub-region, charcoal burning is relatively low in Moroto. This is partly due to the existence of the Police and army barracks in the area, who enforce stringent checks against perpetrators”.*

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