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Could guns and rain spell the end for the Karamojong?

Monday, January 25, 2010 by Marco Ferloni, Mark O'Keefe, Dr Phil O'Keefe, Dr Geoff O'Brien.

Over one million people live in Karamoja, a region found in the North Eastern part of Uganda. To a visitor passing through from the capital city Kampala, Karamoja may look like any other region in Uganda but appearances can be deceptive. The region is characterised by the worst humanitarian and development indicators in Uganda.

The problem of underdevelopment in Karamoja is often characterised as a 'cultural' problem, however, this needs to be understood within the delicate livelihood systems that operate within the region. The people of Karamoja have traditionally based their livelihood on agro-pastoralism. Like many other pastoral societies in East Africa, cattle provide the means for economic and social exchange, they are central to the Karamojong's [\[1\]](#) way of life. However in recent years, insecurity, inability to access former grazing land and livestock raiding, dramatically reduced the amount of cattle in Karamoja. The reduction of cattle is compounded by frequent droughts and failing crop production. These factors have made it difficult to rely on agro-pastoralism to provide a livelihood.

Guns

The rise in violence, and in particular gun crime in Karamoja, has been driven by a number of factors. The desertion of Idi Amin's forces in 1979 from the Moroto Barracks allowed tribes such as the Matheniko tribe to access large supplies of AK-47's. This initiated a cycle of armament within the region. At the same time the civil war within the North of Uganda diverted economic and military resources from Karamoja, therefore weakening government security and severely restricting capital investment. The lax security situation and easy access to small arms only compounded the strong warrior culture already embedded within the local communities. Attacks and killings in neighbouring tribal lands as well as cattle raiding and destroying crops/property increased. A long history of disarmament campaigns have been unsuccessful in removing weapons from the region and have bred distrust and resentment towards the government.

Rain

The Karamojong depend on rainfall for survival. However rainfall is now more variable, due to climatic change compounded by local deforestation. There is now less water available for agricultural activities and for the re growth of indigenous vegetation- It is apparent that rain-fed agricultural production is failing year after year.

For this reason, Karamoja can be perceived as being in state of emergency transition, a situation where the population relies on external organisations to largely support survival

strategies. The Karamojong are dependent on external food aid, both in terms of food for consumption and seeds for food production which are planted for every new season. However, for the past three years many households have received little or no harvest. Evidently, the prospect for long-term development does not lie with continuation of the status quo.

What is happening in Karamoja now? Change is occurring in Karamoja. However, external actors drive that change. A government official stated that: *“To change the people and become partners first we have to disorganise the existing setup and create another setup”*. Within this framework of change, cultural and participatory issues become central. The Karamojong culture, without considering tribal differences, is based on a strong patriarchal structure where women are relegated to the margins and where children are forced to work rather than attending formal education. A system not attuned to the western/northern/developed countries ideal of development, civil society, and human rights issues begs the question- what is it going to be sacrificed in the name of the ‘development’? And who is going to sacrifice it?

Possible ways forward

Within such a complex scenario it is not easy to find a fair compromise between the old to be changed and the new to be established. What would the Karamojong do if they could decide themselves? It is difficult to say but a key point seems to be the participation of those rural communities who are actually in danger of ‘extinction’. We think that the Karamojong people deserve the right to be consulted about their future. Whenever transformations take place, changes are less painful if the ‘objects’ of change become the ‘actors’ in the process itself.

For those in charge of development planning in the region, now is a good opportunity to show how much has been learnt in the past forty years. Finding a compromise with the Karamojong that reflects the need for economic growth, that respects their cultural differences and understands their capacity to comply with basic human rights is key to improving long term livelihood strategies in the future.

[1] The authors use Karamojong as a term to define the different ethnic groups living in the Karamoja region