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## **Karamoja, Uganda: A Region Capable of Developing an Agricultural Food Source**

### Introduction

The Karamoja region in northeast Uganda is one of the least developed places on Earth. Traditionally a warrior nomadic people, the Green Revolution has done little to benefit of the Karamojong. These herding people have been caught in a never-ending cycle of periodic droughts and cattle raids from rival tribes, leaving them unable to develop. If the people ever hope to improve their lifestyle without constantly relying on foreign food aid, they must forgo their pastoral traditions and settle down as agro-pastoral farmers.

However, they cannot be expected to do this all alone. In the past, “the Karamojong people had lost the will to struggle against the odds and produce their own food,” Janet Museveni, wife of Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni, stated. “Our first task [is] to motivate people to begin the struggle for food production again”. The incessant potential of raids has always left a sense of insecurity in Karamojong tribes, making it difficult to convince the people to settle down and plant crops. For the last decade, the Ugandan Army has employed a disarmament campaign that has been relatively successful; the improved security allows the government, and other aiding countries, to focus on creating a sustainable system in the region. Conversely, foreign contributors are generally more eager to send emergency food aid than invest in developing long-lasting livelihoods.

Another main problem is water availability. As opposed to the rest Uganda, which has many rivers and lakes throughout its landscape, Karamojong has a parched terrain. The climate is also very erratic, making it quite difficult to become accustomed appropriately and still have a decent livelihood. If a steady source of water can be supplied to Karamoja villages and families, an agricultural lifestyle could be developed. Pastures could be man-monitored too. There have already been plans made to create some dams, so the future looks brighter.

A final key factor to the lack of development is simply the deficiency of knowledge and technology in the area of farming. As hunters who rarely dug holes or worked in fields, the Karamojong need to be taught the most basic yet efficient techniques of farming and irrigation. Given the unsympathetic climate of Karamojong, methods to adapt to the low rainfall also need to be considered. To obtain the equipment necessary for this education, training, and subsequent extension will require outside aid, but the results should be great. In the end, the Karamojong must look to other skills and industries, beyond just farming, to make life in this harsh region truly sustainable and independent.

### Background

Uganda is a country about the size of Oregon with a predominately rural population of approximately 34.6 million. The “Pearl of Africa” is bordered by: South Sudan to the north, Kenya to the east, Tanzania to the south, and the Democratic Republic of Congo to the west. Although landlocked, Uganda contains many large lakes, including, but not only, Lake Victoria and Lake Kyoga. Overall, Uganda has substantial natural resources including: fertile soils, regular rainfall, small deposits of copper, gold, and other minerals, and recently discovered oil. Uganda is a green and fertile country, a land of dense forests and elephant grass.

In stark contrast, Karamoja, though being part of Uganda, is located on a plateau 1,120 to 1,360 meters high, and characterized by thorny plants and grasses. The savanna becomes green with rainfall during the spring, but dries up again in the fall, when the rain stops. The dry season is very windy, so there is almost no surface water. During a rare storm, riverbeds may fill up in a few hours, but will dry just as quickly once the storm passes. Its population of roughly 1.2 million has repeatedly been left on the brink of starvation from consecutive years of low rainfall. Partly because of that, Karamoja has the lowest development indicators of any region in the country. The region is known to suffer from chronic poverty, malnutrition and food shortages, as well as frequent drought and other natural disasters. Results of a nutrition survey by the Ministry of Health showed that the acute malnutrition rate among children under the age of five in Karamoja is around 13.4 %.

Throughout history, this region has also caused the most trouble for the Ugandan government because of the number of people holding arms. The episodic droughts, especially the 2008 drought that killed hundreds of thousands, forced this region to maintain its pastoral origins while the rest of the country more or less urbanized and advanced ahead in the technologies. The pastoral lifestyle forced the Karamojong to fight for lands of pasture for their livestock, resulting in violent outbreaks. Bloody scenes cattle rustling were also abundant. Until only recently has Karamoja not resisted Ugandan governments attempts to educate the people. Because of all these resistances, the Karamoja region has extremely low food security among other disadvantages. Nowadays, the Karamojong realize their need to change and are willing to develop a better lifestyle.

### The Karamojong

There are two main patterns of village structure found among the people of Karamojong. More permanent settlements have internal compounds, sleeping houses, and sometimes granaries. These are generally located near dependable water sources and tend to be found in central areas of Karamoja. The women in the families sometimes carry out light agriculture, so that is an added bonus. The other type of structure is temporary camps; these are chiefly complexes of corrals to contain cattle, sheep, and goats. There are usually only temporary shelters for humans. The camps are found in the eastern and western parts portions of the region. They are very mobile because of the necessity to adapt to changes in climate and find new pasture and water for the cattle. Men perform the pastoral duties in the camps.

The average Ugandan family has about seven children per woman. In Karamoja, the number is slightly higher, about eight to nine children per woman. A family usually lives in a manyata, a small homestead, and often times in an extended family. The manyata frequently consist of two huts; one hut for the mother to cook, and the other as living quarters. The Karamojong are almost exclusively nomadic, and consequently their homes are mostly temporal and made of thatch in order to expedite their frequent migrations. An occasional wild fire caused by the arid, dry climate or a thunderstorm can easily decimate a home.

Given the relatively good conditions this past year, the Karamojong are eating a little “better”, averaging around 2 meals of porridge a day. In the past, due to successive years of droughts, the Karamojong have been forced to live with meager rations. One report reveals a family of seven living off little bits and slivers of goatskin cooked over a small fire as food. Though that is probably an exaggeration, it is not far from the reality. Perhaps a slightly more mundane and realistic scenario: when there is an absence of food, the Karamoja people are left to eat the residue from local sorghum beer, called ebutia.

The Karamojong are a warrior nomadic people, as stated above. Because of this wandering type of existence and a dependence almost solely on cattle, education has long been viewed as unimportant and extraneous. The fear for the Karamojong was that education would bring about an elite class that would be less responsive to the traditions of the region and did not respect societal cultural demands. Up until 2001, the Karamojong followed a ritual where they literally buried their pens to symbolize their outright rejection of formal education. As a result, most people in the world, including the rest of Uganda itself, view the Karamojong as a group of ignorant and wild people, branding the area as “the Wild West”. Finally in 1998, Save the Children (Norway) collaborated with Uganda’s Ministry of Education to develop a curriculum called Alternative Basic Education for Karamoja (ABEK). At present time, only 11 % of the people in Karamoja are considered to be literate. In addition, only about 25% of children are in school, but overall Karamoja is much more receptive to educational aid from the outside. If the future of Karamoja is even the slightest bit more able to read and understand national papers and media, there will inevitably be development.

Human welfare and living conditions of the Karamojong have declined significantly due to many of the factors listed above. Factors such as environmental issues, insecurity, marginalization, illiteracy, poor health and poor infrastructure are some of the issues. The life expectancy of a Karamojong person is 47.7 compared to the national life expectancy of 50.4 years. The infant mortality rate is 105 (per 1000 live births) and the under-five mortality rate is 174 (per 1000 live births). Five health facilities across the region have been rehabilitated and equipped with essential drugs and basic medical equipment, in collaboration with the Institute for Cooperation and Development (C&D), an international faith-based NGO, so health care is available. However, an interesting fact is that the Karamojong women prefer not to give birth in hospitals because they believe that their children will be more likely to be born dead. As a result, miscarriages and ruptured urethra surgery are commonplace.

Cattle are of significant symbolic and economic importance to the Karamojong. Not just because they are good for milk and physical labor, the Karamojong believe that God gave all cattle to them. This implies that all the cattle that aren’t theirs were stolen. Coincidentally, and unfortunately, the Pokot people, who live right on the border of Kenya directly adjacent to Karamoja, have their own convictions about their divine right to cattle. The tension causes both people to sporadically try to “re-gain” their cattle. This usually leads to violence and subsequent death. This creates yet another barrier that impedes improving agricultural productivity.

### The Future

As one walks from village to village in Karamoja, he or she will see much suffering in the eyes of the villagers. Their skeletons push the skin out of their thin bodies, their lips are parched and dry, and the children’s bellies are bloated from malnutrition. However, there is something good to be noticed. Despite dry spells, gardens have patches of green; people can be seen hoeing away in their gardens. What does this imply?

The Karamojong people are finally settling down and beginning to farm. They still maintain their pastoralism, but just to a lighter degree of importance. Something to watch for is the devegetation and degradation of soils due to overstocking. Livestock are restricted to too small areas leading to disease at times too. People have been pushed from location to location in search for water and pasture. Recently though, outsiders have noticed that some of the local farms in the Karamoja region have virgin fertile soils that can support the growth of Sim Sim, Beans, Maize, Sunflower, Millet, Sorghum, Potatoes, Onions and Rice. “I have discovered shortly that I had wasted a lot of

time looking after cattle when farming pays within a short time and provides food for your family rather than depending on WFP food rations,” said Dodoth, a villager from Tepeth. The bottom line is, many previously cattle raiding tribes are transitioning to a more agricultural based lifestyle and reaping the many benefits.

Women in Karamojong are some of the bravest, most courageous people in the world. There is an ever-present gender based violence against women that is all but invisible. In the past when cattle raids were more frequent, Karamojong warriors would use rape as a tactic to retaliate. The most common documented forms of gender based violence in Karamoja are rape of women as they go about their daily tasks gathering firewood or fetching water for their families, courtship rape (which is largely overlooked as a cultural practice) domestic violence, defilement, female genital cutting, and denial of an education for the girl child. Numbers show that 49% of women experience physical violence in their lives. Often, within families, if the wife is unable to provide, the man will say that he “wasted his cows for her.” To have the ability to persevere in these conditions is truly admirable.

Why are such cruel things like this happening unnoticed? Maybe because it is taboo to speak of it in Karamojong culture, but more likely it is because women are unaware of their rights and do not know where to find support. This is all connected to information insufficiency and lack of government intervention. It’s true that recently much foreign aid has come into Karamoja, so the livelihood has stayed at an “acceptable” level, but there’s no way the region will improve on any of the problematic factors of water portioning, life security, or farming without internal organization.

In Pupu village, Maria Anyuka smiles as she shows her giant pumpkin that she planted in her garden a year earlier. Like many other people in Karamoja, she used to rely solely on emergency food aid for her family. Now, thanks to the Karamoja Productive Assets Programme (KPAP), run by World Food Programme and supported by U.K. aid, she grows her own crops. In fact, she grew surplus for her family and was able to sell the rest for money; she used the money to send her nine-year-old daughter to school.

It is because of the result of programs like these that Karamoja has halved the required amount of emergency food aid it needs from the world. The programs work to create local sources of income from within villages, spurring on the so-called village “economy”. New varieties of crop are planted and irrigation systems and ways to harness natural underground water sources are all a part of this project to create a more reliable system for households to grow food. With average rainfall the following results showed for sorghum: 60.9 % of the crop in a good condition, 19.6 % in a fair state and 19.5 % in poor condition, and the maize: was 54% in a good condition, 19.4% in a fair condition and 25.8 % in poor condition. The end result: a majority of the crop is in perfect condition to either feed the family or sell to others.

A needed shift in Karamoja concept is the lessening of the importance of the cattle to their culture. It is true they are extremely valuable in giving milk, plowing, and irrigation, but they are not valuable enough to lose lives for or abuse women for. If this idea were established, the life insecurity (from rival raids) would be considerably lessened and the people could focus on developing a sustainable lifestyle. Peace and calm are perfect for an environment to cultivate a forward moving civilization. Also, the government could more easily intervene without having to do so by force.

If the Ugandan government were able to organize the Karamojong tribes into small settlements, organization and food production would increase greatly. Then, with the help of foreign aid, seeds, tools and equipment could be sent to help the people begin farming subsistence crops.

Something to keep in mind is that there appears to be several profitable mining areas in Karamoja, so if the population grows (and it grows quickly) the mines will always be there as a steady source of money to buy the food or tools needed to sustain lives. These villages would also be a better protection against natural climate disasters because the people could help one another survive. Borlaug's high-yielding variety crops would be a perfect fit for the unreliable climate of Karamoja. In a sense, the Karamojong should urbanize and eventually have their own unified, local government system or something of that caliber.

The Millennium Development Goal that most appropriately reflects Karamoja's needs is Goal number one: eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. Seeing as the Karamojong people are willing to shift to a more agro-heavy lifestyle, investing in educating them in irrigation and farming techniques would be highly beneficial. The recently finished Moruita Check Dam was a great investment, as it will collect water from over 30 seasonal rivers to be used later in the dry seasons. This way, the Karamojong will have back-up resources in case of another drought. All of these would have never been possible if the Ugandan government had not enforced the disarmament policy that decreased some of the violence in the region. The region will probably continue to need foreign aid for several more years, but soon it will be up to par with the rest of Uganda--- and may even surpass it.

The World Food Programme has already done so much, and should continue to do so. The Karamoja Productive Assets Programme is a great idea that should be utilized throughout the whole Karamoja region. For other charitable organizations, continuous donations of emergency food supplies and tools would be greatly appreciated. As for local communities in our own country, the greatest impact one could hope to make is raise awareness for what is occurring on the other side of the world. Organizations like Key Club International could organize fundraisers or just volunteer in general to spread the information of such suffering in Karamoja; strength in numbers can achieve much influence.

### Conclusion

Farming has proven to be possible in the rough climate of Karamoja. The Green Revolution may have passed overhead before, but Karamoja can have its own revolution. From increased productivity to a more peaceful life, agriculture has the potential to completely transform the Karamojong way of life and future. However, the Karamojong along with the Ugandan government must be completely for this concept or else everything will crumble and return to chaos and suffering. There must be a polarization of ideas and unity in thought for this plan to succeed. One bad influence could affect the entire region. But on the other side, one great influence could all at once make peace.

The future of Karamoja looks bright. The World Food Programme has provided relief food to over 140,000 hungry people in the region, the Moruita Dam has prepared the people for any droughts to come, and the world at large is looking supportive. All the latest technology and research carried out by the big brother and sister countries can be given to Karamoja. The threat of rival cattle raiders from Pokot or anywhere has been suppressed. The best seeds and crops developed by the greatest minds can be given to Karamoja. Great teachers can be employed in the region to teach the latest irrigation techniques to cultivate the biggest and best crops one can possibly grow. If the people fail, the world is there to catch them. By no means will lifestyle be completely altered immediately. The process will definitely be a long struggle, and a painful one at that. But there is one thing that is clear about the future; an agricultural-based food production regiment will provide a more dependable, stable source that will improve the lives of the people

of Karamoja. There is nothing to be afraid of; there is only a need to change. Now it is up to the Karamojong to take action and have the desire to live a better life.

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