

**Pathways to Resilience in the Karamoja Cluster**  
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**WORKING PAPER**

**An ordinary language survey of notions of resilience in Ngakaramojong**

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**Abstract**

The notion of *resilience* of people in extreme circumstances is not new in academic literature. In the case of the Karamojong, the term was used to describe the survival of the majority of the population, and the durability of many aspects of their culture, in the face of regular and massive shocks: environmental ones in respect of drought and famine, and human ones – low-intensity warfare with related communities and violent interventions by the state (e.g. Gray 2000).

More recently the term has become a humanitarian/development meme. The image it conveys is of mutually supportive communities sharing their diverse assets and in consequence able to recover from environmental shocks or armed conflict. Where it is lacking, development actors can deploy strategies to (re)generate lost social capital and build communities’ resilience to face future shocks. Development, however, is by definition about change, whereas resilience is – at least according to more technical definitions - about stasis, the ability to resist change. Is resilience what humanitarian-development processes work with and to advance, or what they work against?

In this research we are exploring whether Karamojong culture has concepts relating to resilience in any of its definitions and what people understand it is dependent on. We are doing this through exploring how ordinary language is used in day to day discourse, in proverbs and sayings, in norms and customs, and in perceptions of the present in the context of history. This is an on-going project and we hope to share our initial findings.

**Introduction and research design**

This research is part of a project of the London School of Economics’ Centre for Public Authority and International Development called *Deconstructing Notions of Resilience: Diverse post-conflict settings in Uganda*, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. We are looking at ideas about resilience in the aftermath of conflict across all of northern Uganda – West Nile, including looking at South Sudanese refugees; Acholi and other LRA affected areas; and Karamoja.

In recent years, the notion of resilience has become a popular meme in development contexts – here in Karamoja projects often now have resilience in their titles, while the idea that the Karamojong and their culture are resilient is much older. Our project questions whether these ideas are the same. We think they are not: for example Sandra Gray (2000) has identified cattle raiding as the principle means of resilience, of bouncing back; while development ideas of resilience are often highly normative in pursuing the liberal principles of donor governments. We are also concerned that the idea of resilience is one that can be used to promote a psychologising agenda in development, depoliticising the crises people face and putting the responsibility for their survival back on them and taking it away from national and international authorities. Our interest is in what the Karamojong think about resilience; whether they see themselves as resilient and why; and how their ideas

compare to the various definitions of resilience in English and how they interact with resilience in development-speak.

So far we have undertaken a pilot which provides some provisional insights into how pastoral communities in Karamoja perceive the concepts of risks and resilience and what strategies they apply to survival. Based on a survey exploring language and expressions used in NgaKaramojong - conducted between August and September 2018 with people from vulnerable pastoralist communities - 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. Most survival strategies were also reported to not be sustainable and have significant social, economic and environmental impact to their communities and the country at large. They include the (illegal) cutting and burning of trees for charcoal and firewood which affects the environment negatively and destroys the general ecological system.

Karamoja is a region that has suffered social, economic and political changes since the start of disarmament which was conducted between 2006 and 2011. The region has been severely affected by drought and as such the population has been living in a constant state of crisis<sup>1</sup>. 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 keepers have to walk further and further 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 November<sup>2</sup> and this period has become ever shorter (USAID 2018). The dry season lasts eight months a year, and it is also very difficult for the locals to grow food on the land during that time.

This area is not just 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 carried on attacking their now defenceless neighbours carrying out rape, torture and murder. In fact, 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 people lost their livelihoods and had to resort to alternative livelihood strategies. Men felt vulnerable as they could not go hunting to provide for their families nor protect their loved ones from the 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 women the most: married women 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

Our project is seeking to undertake an ordinary language survey in Karamoja. A pilot was undertaken between August and September 2018 and a further round of data collection is planned during July and September. It aims to explore if 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. So far the team has conducted 16 Focus Group with 128 respondents (60%

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<sup>1</sup> 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).

<sup>2</sup> 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.

male, 40% female). Discussions typically lasted about two hours men and women. In future rounds we are planning more disaggregation.

### Initial findings

The research highlighted that ideas of resilience were 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 asked about key shocks as identified by the 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 include 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 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 for resale. People buy or get credit from the sellers to go and sell for profits which helps them to support their families. Although *ebooking* has been a term that has been used for some time, it was usually only women who carried it out as an activity. What has changed now is the involvement of men in the activity that was formally predominantly women. The word is now very common in Moroto, while in Napak the same phenomenon is referred to as “*buze-out*” borrowed from an English word.
- *Akiyek Enyota* - is a word use to describe the process for artisanal mining. This is used to be a rare word in the Ngakaramojong language. This activity is not secure but people reported they would prefer doing it rather than staying at home. A report which was released in Kampala recently notes that many small scale miners are not registered by Uganda Registration Service Bureau (URSB) which leaves regulation of sales unmonitored, and miners trade on black market. It showed, for example, that 98% of Karamojong who mine gold in Amudat, Nakapiripirit and Moroto districts 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 states. The sanitation at mining sites is also deplorable - miners report having to trek more than 15 kilometres in search of drinking and cleaning water (USAID 2018).

New livelihood strategies, largely just for subsistence, are now integrated within the culture but are not sustainable and have social, economic and environmental impact to the communities and the country at large. For example, the burning of bushes and cutting of trees affects 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”.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

Our initial findings suggest that the NgaKaramojong language and culture is adapting to the massive changes in their way of life over the past ten to fifteen years. These are very concrete ideas in contrast with the abstract notion of resilience. Our next task is to try to get behind these words to find out if people think there were social or psychological factors that help people and communities survive and recover from crises in the past, and whether they think these are still to be found. We also need to ask whether development actors’ ideas of resilience and the programming that ensues resonate with people and their ideas of what has happened in the past. We welcome your ideas and advice.

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