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**WORKING PAPER**

**Experiences of Rural-Urban Migration in Northern Karamoja, Uganda**

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**Abstract**

Towns in northern Karamoja, Uganda are growing due to an expanding commercial sector, shifts in livestock-based rural livelihoods, and the economic and social appeal of urban life. This paper presents qualitative data from 83 individual migrants to the towns of Abim, Kaabong, and Kotido, the three largest towns in northern Karamoja. This research aimed to better understand the factors leading to migration, the livelihood strategies pursued by those moving to towns, and the opportunities and challenges associated with urban life. The data show that the majority of respondents in the urban centers retained links to their rural communities: these connections allowed migrants to access key assets such as land, social network, and food, and allowed rural residents to receive remittances and other forms of support. Those who were not able to maintain ties to their rural homes or families were frequently the most vulnerable; most were widowed or abandoned women. Reasons for migration included household-level shocks, such as loss of animals or the death of a family member, as well as food insecurity or “hunger.” Towns exert a strong pull economic pull factor and offer hope of a better life. However, many respondents struggled with the cost of living in town and worked multiple ad hoc and low skilled jobs in order to get by. While rural linkages were important for populations in both areas, most respondents did not envision returning to their rural areas. Urban planning and services have not kept pace with migratory patterns.

## **Introduction**

The impetus for the research presented in this paper arose after observing the growth in towns in the Karamoja sub-region from 2006 onwards. The perimeters of towns such as Moroto appeared to be expanding with a growing number of homesteads, markets, and drinking establishments. The improved security along roads that came in the wake of the start of the forced disarmament campaign brought more traders, transport vehicles, NGO workers, and business people to these areas. Increasing numbers of women were visible along the roads in the early morning, carrying firewood, thatch, wild fruits, brew and charcoal to sell in the towns; men walked or rode bicycles to town, bringing livestock, building poles, or simply their labor. Industries to support construction sprang up on the perimeters of the towns, including brick making and sale points for gravel. Quarrying increased in the hills to meet the urban demand. Cell phone towers went up in major towns; shops and kiosks selling second-hand phones and airtime quickly followed. While these changes were apparent to the casual observer, district and local authorities seemed to have little information on the new residents, why they had come, or what their daily experiences or long-term aspirations entailed. Some authorities denied outright that any urban expansion was taking place. The disconnect between the obvious growth of these small urban areas and the available information spurred a team from the Feinstein International Center of Tufts University, in partnership with the international organization Mercy Corps, to begin a more thorough investigation. The objective of the research was to examine the factors leading to migration, the livelihood strategies pursued by those moving into towns, and the opportunities and challenges associated with urban life for migrants. This paper discusses these findings in depth. While the narratives from the respondents are from 2014, the discussion includes continuing observations, experiences in, and learning from the people of the Karamoja sub-region.

## **Research design and methods**

The research examined the migration of families and individuals from rural to urban areas in northern Karamoja, focusing on the three district centers of Abim, Kaabong, and Kotido.<sup>1</sup> We used qualitative methods of semi-structured open-ended in-depth individual interviews with 83 respondents across the three study sites in early 2014. We used convenience sampling and sought to balance respondents by age, gender, type of occupation, and location of interviews (e.g., town centers, place of employment, peri-urban areas, etc.). We intentionally skewed the sample to have a greater representation of women (48 women, versus 34 men) in order to investigate the specific characteristics of women who move to town alone. We also skewed our study to have a greater number of respondents in Kotido, as this is the largest of the three towns and the economic driver in northern Karamoja. In total, we conducted 43 interviews in Kotido, 22 in Kaabong, and 18 in Abim.

In addition to the 83 individual interviews, we held a focus group discussion with miners at an artisanal gold mine in Kaabong and interviewed 11 key informants who could provide context and background on urban migration and employment. To note, most research on livelihoods focuses on the household as the unit of analysis; in this study we chose instead to examine individual respondents. We did this because sought to understand the role of individuals in decision-making, experiences and aspirations, which may or may not be tied to a larger household.

This paper presents data from a small qualitative study based on convenience sampling and hence the trends and patterns apply only to this specific study population. While additional research would be required to test the broader veracity of these findings, we do not believe that the study population is unique or extraordinary. In addition, although the data are from 2014 and changes have continued to

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<sup>1</sup> Population estimates are unreliable and do not take into account either seasonal fluctuations or recent migration, but Kotido is the largest of the three towns with probably over 200,000 people; Abim is the next largest with under 100,000; and Kaabong is a distant third with under 30,000 inhabitants. These numbers are pulled from various internet sources and should not be considered reliable but are listed to give a sense of the relative size of the three locations.

occur in these locations, our on-going research and observations lead us to believe that the findings presented here continue to reflect experiences of people throughout the Karamoja sub-region.

The sample contains a bias towards migrants who feel that their migration has been successful. Given the relative ease of going home, we assume that migrants who regret their move to town return home and are not captured in this study. An exception to this is women who have severed (whether by choice or otherwise) ties with relatives in rural areas.

This paper discusses the urban side of the rural-urban link. However, we know that most rural households engage in at least some form of interaction with towns on a regular or periodic basis. This may be to buy food or other commodities, to access medical care, or to sell natural resources, livestock, or prepared goods (such as brew). This study examines a minority who have managed to carve out an (at times tenuous) existence from an urban base.

## **Literature Review**

Urbanization is shaping the character of many African communities, but Africa overall is not urbanizing as rapidly as other parts of the world, particularly Asia. East Africa is the least urbanized region in Africa, and is urbanizing at a slower rate than West and Southern Africa (Potts 2008, UN-Habitat 2010). UN-Habitat estimates Uganda to be approximately 13% urban, with predictions of a population that is 20% urban by 2030.

Satterwaite and Tacoli (2003) argue that small and medium urban centers play a critical role in poverty reduction in rural areas, but definitions of these centers vary widely. Classifications based on populations can also be at times intentionally misleading (Potts 2008). In Uganda, a settlement with more than 2,000 people is considered “urban” and one with 60,000 or more residents is a “city.” By this definition, both Kotido and Abim are cities and Kaabong is an urban area. Regardless of terminology, the three settlements in northern Karamoja discussed in this paper are important economic hubs for an extended area.

The process of urbanization is often neither definitive nor final for those who relocate from rural areas. Potts found that farmers and pastoralists in sub-Saharan Africa often moved to peri-urban areas while continuing to cultivate or to keep livestock herds. The move is usually spurred by a desire to be closer to markets and have better access to basic services. Other research on East Africa explores town-based pastoralism and the functioning of urban centers as safety valves for pastoralists against negative impacts of drought and population growth. Small towns can act as intermediaries between rural and urban settings, and can serve as alternatives to farther or more permanent outmigration for pastoralist communities. These towns often allow for livestock keeping and serve as a point of integration between the pastoral and the national economy (Ornas 1990). Catley and Aklilu (2013), however, argue that while better-off pastoralists may be able to benefit from commercial urban opportunities, this is often not the case for poorer pastoralists, and commercialization may speed their departure from the pastoral economy.

Several authors argue for a less rigid dichotomy in the concepts of rural and urban; this is strongly supported by the data for this study. Baker (1990) argues that there is increasing intensification of rural-urban links, and that African markets have never been divided into the exclusive categories of rural and urban, formal and informal. Networks of friendship, kinship, and family ties have become complex and blur distinctions. In addition, there is “circulatory migration” between rural and urban sectors and formal and informal sectors. Similarly, Tacoli (1998) argues that “rural” and “urban” are closely linked through flows of individuals, commodities, and money. Households themselves can be “multi-spatial,” combining farm and non-farm activities and rural and urban residences.

Urban migration may alleviate poverty and bring better access to services, but the specific benefits of sedentarization for pastoralists are mixed and under-studied (Nathan, Fratkin, and Roth 1996; Fratkin, Roth, and Nathan 1999). Children often experience negative nutritional changes, possibly from having

less access to fresh milk from camels, as in the case of Rendille communities (Nathan, Fratkin, and Roth 1996). A study of maternal malnutrition among pastoralist groups in northern Kenya found that pastoral women in small towns showed lower nutritional status than nomadic women (Shell-Duncan and Yung 2004). A 2014 study found that sedentarization of pastoralist in Karamoja was contributing to the emergency and re-emergence of epidemic diseases, including cholera, hepatitis E, yellow fever, and meningococcal meningitis (Cummings et al., 2014).

Pull factors for pastoralists to urban areas include employment opportunities and livelihood diversification as well as access to services. Push factors include the loss of livestock, land degradation, development-induced displacement, natural disasters, repeated drought, and lack of recognition of rights (Kipuri 2010; Nathan, Fratkin, and Roth 1996). Violent conflict among pastoralist groups has also been a major cause of displacement and migration (Hagmann and Mulugeta 2008). Restrictions on mobility greatly hinder pastoral livelihoods and are exacerbated by the nationalization of pastoral lands and denial of pasture and water rights (Mcdowell and De Haan, 1997). Climate change and land-use changes have important implications for pastoralist communities in the Horn of Africa, particularly as many political, social, economic, and ecological crises have resulted from the pressures put on already fragile ecosystems (Suliman and Elagib, 2012).

An increasing trend in migration to cities is the rising number of single women and female-headed households settling in urban areas. Women may move to urban areas in search of the same economic opportunities and services as male migrants, but many women leave their rural homes due to the death of their husbands, mistreatment, and a lack of inheritance rights to land and other assets. As confirmed by this study, single women without rural ties often face specific and pronounced vulnerabilities in urban areas (Stites et al., 2019).

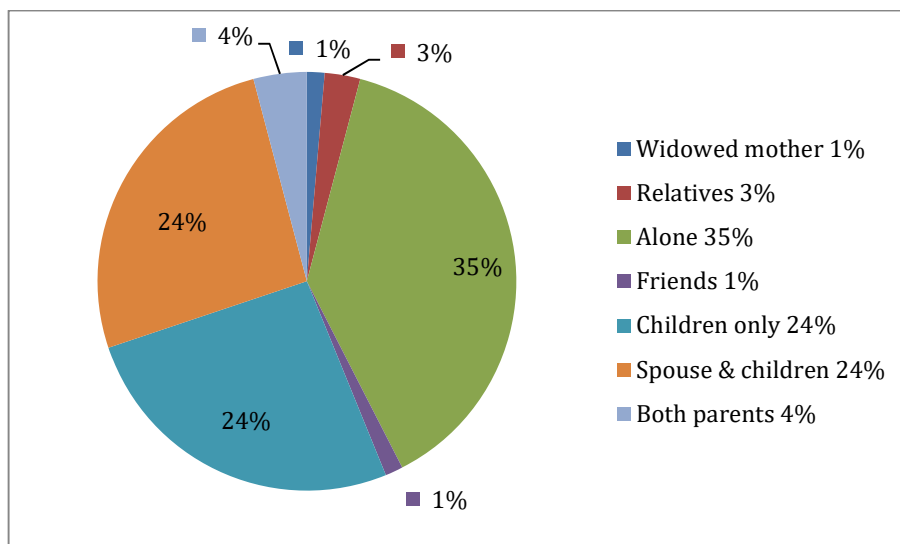
## **Results**

### *Description of sample*

Forty-seven percent of respondents arrived in the urban area two to four years prior to data collection (2010 to 2012). These years correspond with the disbanding of the protected kraals in many areas (see Stites and Akabwai 2009, 2010; Levine 2010) and come after three years (2007-2010) of poor or failed harvests (Burns et al., 2013). Households were likely eager to diversify their livelihood base after several years of crop loss and stress upon livestock herds. Security had improved by this period, meaning that people may have felt more comfortable moving between rural and urban areas and leaving relatives at home in the villages. Approximately one-fourth of respondents reported moving to the urban area five to seven years before the data collection (2006 to 2008). This period corresponds to the start of the forced disarmament campaign, the establishment of the protected kraals, and animal loss from raiding in many areas due to the initially uneven nature of the disarmament campaign (Human Rights Watch, 2007; Stites & Akabwai 2009, 2010).

As shown in the figure below, most respondents reported moving to town alone, followed by traveling with both a spouse and children, or with only children. This last category was widows or abandoned women in all but one case, in which a man moved to Abim with his children after the death of his wife. Those who traveled alone were mostly male (63% of this group) as compared to female (37% of this group). The average age of the men who came alone was 27 years; for females the average age was 30 years.

Figure 1: Who moved with you to town?



### *Maintaining Rural Ties*

The majority of study respondents in Abim, Kotido, and Kaabong had not made a complete break with their rural livelihoods. Many individuals made calculated decisions to take advantage of opportunities in urban locations. These opportunities included labor in emerging construction and services sectors, better-quality education, entrepreneurial possibilities, and the potential for saving towards rural investments in land and livestock.

Continuing links to rural areas were visible in social and economic networks and management of human capital. Very few people had moved their whole family to the urban destination or had severed ties with their rural home. Most respondents engaged in regular exchanges with rural relatives (of food, cash, relief items, and market commodities) and went back to the rural area on a regular basis. This was the case even for individuals who viewed their urban relocation as permanent. Families shared assets, including livestock and labor, between rural and urban locations. This strategy helped to spread risk, diversify livelihoods, and smooth consumption in response to seasonal shifts, shocks, and household demographics. The strength and frequency of these ties to rural areas indicates that settling in town is not a trade between a rural and an urban existence, but rather an expansion of livelihood strategies at the household level to include both rural and urban opportunities.

Most respondents who maintained rural linkages fell into one of the four categories detailed below:

1. Predominately male, these respondents lived in town while some close family members (i.e., parents, wives, or children) lived in the rural area. The respondents visited often and exchanged cash, food, and commodities with those in the village. Polygamous respondents often had a wife or wives in both locations.
2. These respondents returned to the rural areas seasonally to cultivate and lived in town during the dry season only. Others had garden plots in the recently opened agricultural settlements.
3. These respondents perceived their stay in town to be temporary and intended to return home in the near future. Returning to the rural area was often pegged to a specific goal, such as saving a certain amount of money or acquiring enough animals to restock.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> While many respondents said they “hoped to return to their village,” in the coding of the data we deemed “permanent” those who had had been living in town more than three years. A recent study by the author on rural to urban migration in the Acholi sub-region found a similar pattern of migrants reporting that they would like to return home even after being in town for extended periods, Stites et al., 2019.

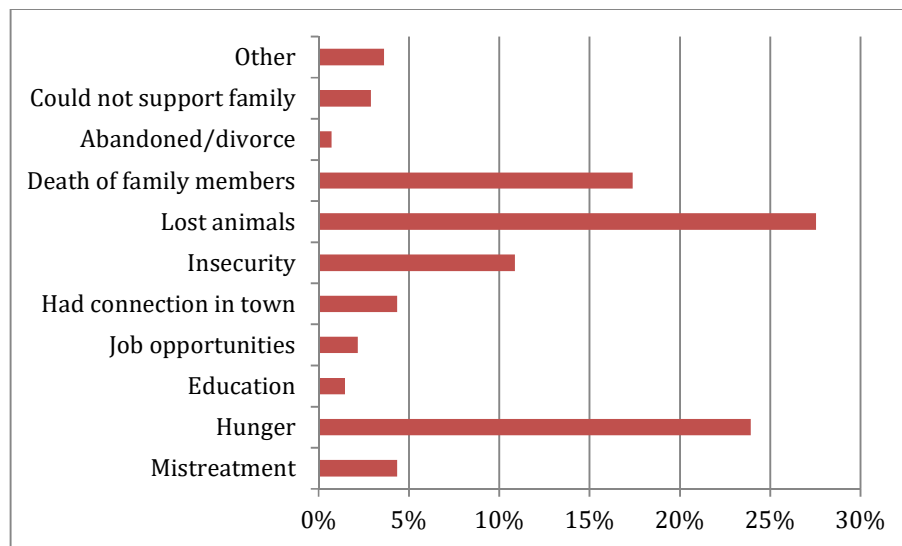
4. These respondents commuted into town on a daily or near daily basis for employment purposes.<sup>3</sup>

An exception to the pattern of maintaining rural ties is the case of women who left their rural homes after being widowed, abandoned, or mistreated. These women were normally in the urban centers with their children and appeared to be generally worse off than their married counterparts. Most reported no or limited connections with their in-laws in the village.<sup>4</sup> The lack of rural connection may increase vulnerability, as migrants rely heavily on land and/or relatives in rural areas for food supplies and assistance with children (many respondents reported one or more child living with relatives in a rural area).

#### *Reasons for moving to town*

We asked respondents why they had left their rural homes or, for daily communities, had established a regular presence in the towns. The three most common responses were loss of animals, hunger, and the death of a family member, as illustrated in the below figure.

**Figure 2: Why did you leave the rural area?** (n=138, multiple responses allowed)<sup>5</sup>



Instances of animal loss were mostly due to raiding; such losses, coupled with poor harvests, led to hunger. A young man from Kotido explained, “When all those animals got raided we became poor and hungry. We had to head to town to survive on casual jobs.”<sup>6</sup> Another young man, also in Kotido, stressed how few options he felt he had after losing his animals:

<sup>3</sup> To note, we intentionally excluded from our sample those individuals who brought firewood or charcoal into towns for sale. These are important livelihood strategies but have been discussed elsewhere (Stites, Fries, and Akabwai 2010). In addition, these strategies take advantage of town markets, but not town employment opportunities or other pull factors.

<sup>4</sup> Although marriage patterns are shifting, most women move to the home of their husbands upon marrying. We did not ask if these widowed or abandoned women were maintaining ties with their natal kin, but in no instance was this information volunteered.

<sup>5</sup> Overlap exists between some categories in Figure 3—such as “lost animals” and “insecurity”—but we sought to remain as true as possible to the narrative provided by the respondent. In this particular example, “insecurity” as a push factor had normally been experienced for an extended period, whereas “lost animals” was a more sudden and cataclysmic event that led to hunger and relocation.

<sup>6</sup> Individual interview, Kotido town.

I lost my cattle to raiding and we were hungry. I had to support my children and the only place to do this is in town. I had thought of raiding myself to get revenge and steal back my cattle, but I decided moving to town would be preferable as I might get killed. It's better to sweat than to die.<sup>7</sup>

Women were the most likely to move following the death of a family member, normally a spouse.

The most widely cited pull factors for migration were economic: people strongly believed that they would be in a better position to support themselves through town-based livelihood strategies. In most instances, respondents described deliberating the risks and perceived opportunities in the urban areas. This was the case even for women who accompanied their husbands to town: most couples said they had made the decision together. A woman in Kotido explained, “It was me together with my late husband who discussed and came up with the decision to do business in town rather than staying in the village with hunger and many other problems.”<sup>8</sup>

Better access to services did not come up as a major consideration in moving to towns. Once in town, however, some respondents did report that they appreciated the better schools. (Many, however, felt they did not have enough of an understanding of what made education “good” or “bad” to make an evaluation.) Those who did feel that town education was better said that teacher attendance was higher and that there seemed to be more encouragement towards children to stay in school. Some parents preferred the town schools for the additional benefits, such as meals, as well as their own ability to find enough work to support their children’s education, which was much more difficult in the rural areas:

The schools in town are better than in the village because here in the town I am able to work and buy them the school requirements; also here in town they even feed them [at school]. It was rather difficult to maintain them in the village schools back home.<sup>9</sup>

Although not an explicit pull factor, being able to access these better schools was a factor in deciding to *stay* in town in some instances.

*Livelihoods in town*

The majority of respondents engage in at least two types of livelihood activities. People normally considered their “primary” livelihood to be that with the highest pay or the most regular employment, but could also be the most time consuming, such as agricultural labor. The table below includes the data on all livelihood activities pursued by respondents in the study population, shown both overall and by gender.

Table 1: Primary and secondary livelihoods in town

ACTIVITY	OVERALL		MALE		FEMALE	
	Primary LH* (n=83)	Additional LHs** (n=97)	Primary LH* (n=34)	Additional LHs** (n=39)	Primary LH* (n=47)	Additional LHs** (n=57)
Works/runs small shop	4%	0	6%	0%	2%	0%
Unloads lorries/buses	5%	1%	12%	3%	0%	0%
Butchering	5%	3%	12%	5%	0%	2%
Fetches and sells	11%	8%	0%	8%	19%	9%

<sup>7</sup> Individual interview, Kotido town.

<sup>8</sup> Individual interview, Kotido town.

<sup>9</sup> Individual interview, Kotido town.

water to homes						
Fetches water for bricks or construction	4%	3%	3%	3%	4%	4%
Domestic service in hotel or restaurant	8%	0%	3%	0%	11%	0%
Domestic service in a home	4%	6%	0%	0%	6%	11%
Petty trade	2%	1%	0%	0%	4%	2%
Crafts	1%	0%	3%	0%	0%	0%
Construction	4%	3%	9%	8%	0%	0%
Brick making	4%	5%	9%	10%	0%	2%
Casual labor ( <i>lejaleja</i> )	13%	5%	18%	5%	9%	5%
Brewing industry	11%	6%	0%	0%	21%	11%
Collects firewood	0%	7%	0%	3%	0%	11%
Charcoal trade	4%	1%	0%	0%	6%	0%
Agriculture	10%	22%	6%	23%	11%	21%
Automotive repair shop	2%	1%	6%	3%	0%	0%
Cash for work***	0%	7%	0%	3%	0%	11%
Other <sup>10</sup>	10%	3%	15%	5%	6%	2%
None	0%			23%		12%

\*Only one response allowed.

\*\* Multiple responses allowed.

\*\*\* Cash for work refers to donor-funded projects.

Many respondents reported engaging in more than two livelihood activities. A 32-year-old mother of seven who had been in Kotido town for six years described her economic strategies:

In town here I decided to be buying charcoal in sacks, and then I retail it in small cans at UGX 500 each. In the end, I would get a profit of UGX 2,000 per sack.<sup>11</sup> In addition, I am a member of the VSLA [village savings and loan association]. The village group loans me money for buying sorghum, and I make the local brew. I would get a loan of UGX 100,000, and when I sell the ebutia [local brew] from that sorghum I made UGX 150,000...I use the profit for other needs and business like buying charcoal and retailing it. I used also to make bricks...I sell them for UGX 100,000. On top of all that I cultivate our land [in our home village] for food to feed the family.<sup>12</sup>

This woman and her husband had been successful to the point that after several years they were able to build their own house in Kotido, which allowed them extensive savings compared to those who paid monthly rents.

A minority of respondents reported having no secondary livelihood—this was 23% of men and 12% of women. This was most often because their primary livelihood was sufficient or because their

<sup>10</sup> “Other” responses for males (n=5 as primary livelihood) included digging latrines, trading goats, driving a motorbike (*bodaboda*), collecting fees for the water association, serving as a local councilor, and, as an additional livelihood, collecting and selling twigs for granaries, and breaking and selling stones. “Other” responses for females (n=3 as primary livelihood) included attending secondary school, making and selling donuts, and, as an additional livelihood, frying fermented *posho*, and selling honey.

<sup>11</sup> One USD was equal to approximately 2,450 UGX at the time of the research, hence the profit here is less than one dollar.

<sup>12</sup> Individual interview, Kotido town.



secondary livelihood had failed. The table below provides some examples of respondents who had economic success in their main livelihood activity.

Table 2: Examples of respondents who did not need to pursue additional livelihood activities

<b>Individual characteristics</b>	<b>Livelihood activity</b>	<b>Reported compensation</b>
Male, 18 years, Kotido	Domestic work at a hotel	60,000 UGX/month, plus meals, plus 3,000 UGX bonus on busy days
Male, 27 years, Kotido	Runs a shop for the owner	25,000 UGX/month, plus meals and housing
Female, widow, 25 years, Kotido	Casual but consistent work washing people's clothes	Makes 2,000–5,000 UGX/day
Male, 20 years, Kotido	Drives a rented <i>bodaboda</i> motorcycle	Makes 3,000 UGX profit most days
Female, 17 years, commutes daily to Kotido	Works as a domestic in a home	1,000 UGX/day, steady pay for past 5 years
Male, 38 years, Kotido	Works for a butcher	Is paid in meat, which he then roasts and sells
Male, 21 years, Kotido	Pumping station attendant; also mends tires	2,000 UGX/day, plus 2,000 UGX per tire repaired. Receives additional 50,000 UGX each month.
Male, 28 years, Kaabong	Porter at construction sites	3,000 UGX/day, plus lunch
Female, 22 years, Abim	Sells drinks in a bar	60,000 UGX/month

The daily cash income in the examples above ranges from 1,000–5,000 UGX (approximately US\$ 0.40 to US\$ 2.00)—still a very small amount of money for daily survival. What sets these primary livelihood activities apart is not, therefore, the rate of pay, but rather the regularity of the work. The young woman who worked as a domestic in someone's home had held the same job for five years, thereby allowing her to save money and smooth her consumption. The widow who washed clothes had a more tenuous position as she went door to door, but had a set of regular clients who provided a degree of stability. The steady nature of these livelihoods is in marked contrast to those of most respondents, who report a range of often very physically demanding livelihood activities in order to meet expenses and make ends meet.

Gender was a key determinant of livelihood differences, as illustrated in the table below.

Table 3: Most important primary livelihood by gender

<b>Male* (n=34)</b>	Casual labor ( <i>lejaleja</i> ) (18%)	Butchering (12%)	Unloading lorries/buses (12%)	Brick making (9%)	Construction (9%)
<b>Female (n=47)</b>	Brewing industry (21%)	Fetching water for homes (19%)	Domestic work in hotel or restaurant (11%)	Agriculture (11%)	Casual labor (9%)

\*Does not include the aggregate category of "other." See footnote 10 above.

These differences mirror the cultural division of roles and responsibilities by gender. Men are primarily engaged in manual labor and women mostly find work in domestic or service industries. Individual narratives highlight nuance in these activities. For instance, while 21% of women cited brewing as their primary livelihood, most did not run their own operation, which requires equipment, a steady supply of inputs, and a safe place to store equipment. A few female brewers were able to

meet these conditions, but the majority either brewed in small batches on an occasional basis or found sporadic jobs assisting other brewers. Reimbursement was often in the form of residue (the dregs of beer making) for these casual hires.

Somewhat surprisingly, firewood sales and charcoal production did not feature heavily within the livelihoods data.<sup>13</sup> No woman reported carrying firewood as her primary economic activity, and only 6% of women listed charcoal as their main activity. (Eleven percent of women and 3% of men listed firewood as an additional activity.) Our assumption is that firewood and charcoal sales remain important for those who live in rural areas near to town, but that those who relocate to towns on a more permanent basis do not pursue this strategy regularly. This shift is probably partially due to decreased proximity to natural resources, but may also be a result of the broader range of more lucrative economic activities available in towns.

Agricultural cultivation was the most frequently cited additional livelihood for both men and women (23% and 21% respectively). Engaging in agriculture took different forms, with variations aligning with location. In Abim, many respondents worked on farms in the surrounding countryside and received payment in cash or food. In Kaabong, people either farmed in their home areas or accessed sites in some of the recently opened agricultural settlements. In Kotido, many respondents returned to their rural villages to cultivate.

We examined the activities performed by widows and abandoned women to see how, if at all, their livelihoods varied from those of females more broadly. Overall, there are no stark differences in the activities pursued by these two groups. This implies that marital status does not have a major impact on access to employment. However, widows and abandoned women did describe specific livelihood challenges. For example, single women find it harder to access and clear land, and hence if they do agricultural work it is more likely for hire. Those who brew are normally working for others and paid at least partially in residue. Importantly, given the predominance of casual and ad hoc employment, households with multiple potential earners are less vulnerable to fluctuations in income. Most of the widows and abandoned women in the study population were the sole breadwinner and had young children, and therefore had less resilience to employment shocks.

### *Challenges in towns*

One of the biggest challenges facing migrants to towns is the cost of living. Rent was the main cost, but respondents faced a number of expenses that did not exist in the rural areas. These included paying for water and buying nearly all food items. Approximately half of the sample did not pay rent. These people owned their own homes (15%), had accommodation as part of their employment (7%), or were staying with friends or relatives (29%). Many respondents in the latter two categories saw their situations as temporary or precarious and were concerned about rental rates even though they were not paying rent at the time of the interview.

Procuring housing may be challenging for widowed or abandoned women in many contexts due to financial concerns, stigma, and discrimination. In this study, more single women were staying with friends or relatives than those who were not single. This may be due to increased sympathy on the part of friends or relatives for these women and their children. Home ownership was the same regardless of gender of the household head, but—in all instances—the women's husbands had acquired these homes prior to their deaths. Single women did not report discrimination in finding housing or in rental rates, but did struggle to pay rents on a single income.

Some respondents reported that finding work was a major challenge, although complaints about this were less common than might be expected. More widespread employment-related concerns were the irregularity of work, dependence on an employer (such as for food or accommodation), low rates of

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<sup>13</sup> Although charcoal and firewood were not main categories themselves, these are both important inputs for brickmaking, listed as the primary livelihood activity by 9% of men and as a secondary activity by 10% of men.

pay, and the physical demands of many of the types of labor.

Some respondents reported instances of abuse and discrimination along ethnic lines. However, there were at least as many stories of generosity and kindness. People were taken in by strangers, allowed to share small living spaces, trained as apprentices or partners in new businesses, and given food, loans, and other basic necessities. A Jie man who had moved to Abim town a year earlier told his story:

When I first arrived, I slept under a big tree in the center of town. Then a gentleman approached and asked why I was there. He listened to my story and invited me to stay with him. He also fed me and gave me clothes. The gentleman is a local businessman...he is not a Jie. I am still friends with him.<sup>14</sup>

Respondents who lived in their place of employment often expressed a combination of gratitude and concern regarding their situation. Some of these narratives hint at exploitation, as in the account of a woman in Kotido with seven children who had been abandoned by her husband. She moved into town four years earlier, and explained:

When we first arrived I used to go and beg for beer residue from the brewing lady. She decided to give us food and accommodation and so I started to help her...I don't get paid, but she looks after us. She gives us food and accommodation, and she gives me some of the beer she makes.

This woman was very appreciative of the kindness of her host, who also gave her access to land where she was able to grow crops for food and to sell in the market. However, when asked about problems she explained:

It's difficult because I don't get paid for my work. So although I have food and accommodation I don't have any money except when I manage to harvest some crops...Also, my host sometimes gets angry with me when I make mistakes and this is torture because I'm dependent on her.<sup>15</sup>

Such live-in jobs and the associated vulnerabilities were more common for women than men, but men in the sample did hold such positions, including as security guards and hotel workers.

#### *Commuting into town*

Commuting from on a daily basis is one means of avoiding high rents and other challenges associated with urban life. Most of the commuters in the study population were in Kotido town, where we interviewed five commuters out of a total of 43 respondents. While the characteristics of these five individuals are certainly not representative, some of the patterns visible here may also exist in the broader population.

Table 4: Characteristics of daily commuters in Kotido

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Distance traveled</b>	<b>Years commuting</b>	<b>Relevant details</b>	<b>Type of work found in town</b>
Female	26	< 1 hour	6	Stays home to cultivate in rainy season	Brews in dry season in town
Female	17	1 hour	5	Parents are deceased. Supports her siblings.	Works as domestic in a home; has had this job for five years

<sup>14</sup> Individual interview, Abim town.

<sup>15</sup> Individual interview, Kotido town.

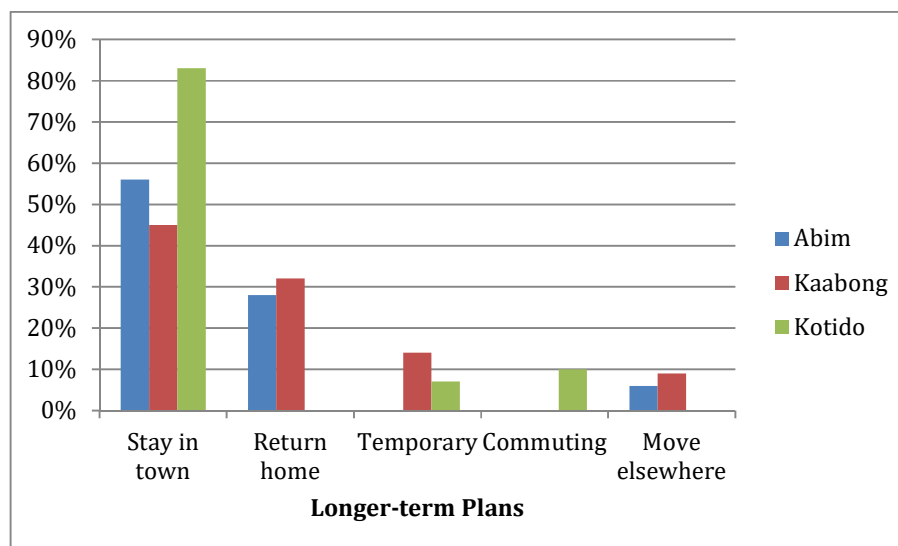
				Commutes with a friend.	
Male	30	< 1 hour	5	Commutes with his wife to support their children	Digs latrines, fetches water, makes bricks
Female	17	< 1 hour	2	Stays home to cultivate in rainy season. Lives with her parents.	Washes plates in a restaurant. Also does domestic work in homes.
Female	20	3 hours	3	Widow with young children	Works in a restaurant/hotel

The commuters listed above are relatively young, are pulled to town by employment in services or hospitality, and all have strong family ties to their home villages. As with many other respondents in Kotido, each of the individuals in the above chart had started commuting to town following the loss of animals in raids and subsequent hunger. The 20-year-old widow lost her husband in the same raid that took the family herd. In each case, the respondent acknowledged that while commuting was difficult, he or she believed that the strategy of balancing town and village life was likely to be permanent or to continue for at least the foreseeable future.

### *Plans and Aspirations*

We asked people about their future plans and aspirations. Sixty-seven percent of overall respondents said that they planned to continue to live in town or to commute to town on a daily basis.

**Figure 3: Longer-term plans by location (n=80)**



As illustrated in the above figure, many more respondents planned to remain in Kotido for the long term than in the other two locations. This very likely reflects the greater vibrancy and economic opportunities available in Kotido, the largest town in the region. In a reminder of the importance of the allure of urban life, respondents in Kotido were more likely to express outright enjoyment of town life. For example, a 41-year-old widow from Kaabong who had been living in Kotido for 14 years said:

To tell the truth I love Kotido so much that I will stay here all my life. I intend to settle well by getting land and building my own house...I will not move elsewhere. I will stay in Kotido until I die.<sup>16</sup>

Among respondents who said they planned to return home, a number were highly specific in their plans. Many of those who had lost animals were determined to restock their herds and planned to stay in town until they had enough savings to make this possible. However, a number of respondents expressed ambivalence about whether to remain in town or return to their rural area, as expressed by a 25-year-old man in Kaabong:

Back in the village you can move freely and collect wild foods in the forest. You can also collect firewood and sell it. The village is not crowded, so we rarely have disease outbreaks like here in town. Also, back when we had guns we could hunt, we even killed buffalo, and the whole family could eat meat for a long time...

On the other hand, you can get casual work in town and booze is available every day. In the village, they don't brew every day. There is also a market here every Monday, and if I'm hungry I can always go and see if a relative from the rural areas is selling an animal. If they succeed—he will give me money to buy food for the family.<sup>17</sup>

## Discussion

At first glance, rural to urban migration in Karamoja appears fraught with hardship and difficulties. When looking at the individual migrant we see high costs of living and exploitative, irregular, and poorly paid work. The towns themselves seem to have little capacity to absorb migrants and little effort has gone into the expansion of services and infrastructure. The data for this study confirm many of these aspects: most migrants are living hand-to-mouth and are paid—if paid at all—the equivalent of a dollar a day. There is a complete lack of job security, and securing employment depends on luck and perseverance.

When considering the narratives in more depth, however, a more complex picture emerges. Although many migrants came to town due to economic hardship, those in the study population have largely succeeded in their town-based lives. They have found piecemeal work, they have secured accommodation (with or without paying rent), they are mostly sending their children to school, and they are earning enough funds to purchase food in the market. Many are even sending money back home to support relatives. Most people in our study population feel that, overall, their lives in town are an improvement over their lives in the rural areas.

A successful town-based existence, however, requires certain characteristics, access to assets, and ability to pursue specific strategies.<sup>18</sup> An in-depth comparative study would be required to say for certain, but these findings lead us to hypothesize that it is more likely the *better off* who move to urban areas *and stay*. In other words, we can assume that a good number of people move to towns but are unable to get by. Most of these people then return home or possibly move elsewhere. Those who leave appear to do so relatively quickly and are not captured in our sample.<sup>19</sup> We assume that a number of these people return to their rural homes, but this group may also include those people who

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<sup>16</sup> Individual interview, Kaabong town.

<sup>17</sup> Individual interview, Kotido town.

<sup>18</sup> “Successful” as used here should be seen as relative to the overall situation and extent of hardship in Karamoja. We are not implying that living on USD \$1 a day or less and engaging in grueling and exploitative manual labor is a preferred outcome. The ideal study would be a representative analysis of rural and urban consumption patterns, nutritional status, access to services, and health and education outcomes with intra-household data.

<sup>19</sup> Only 6% of the study population had been in town for less than two years, with only 1% for less than one year. This may be partially due to sampling bias, as we purposively excluded people who had been in town for less than a year so as not to end up with an entire sample made up of temporary or cyclical migrants.

move on to other urban locations such as Mbale, Jinja, and Kampala. Those who stay are not necessarily better off from an economic standpoint, but appear to have the social, human, and political capital (connections, business acumen, perseverance, adequate strength for manual labor, etc.) to make an urban existence work.

Most respondents who had made a success of urban life have retained connections with their families in rural areas. These connections vary from occasional contact and visits to a regular exchange of supplies, staple food items, and cash. This is largely a two-way and symbiotic relationship: urban residents leave children, wives, and the elderly at home; they return to cultivate and/or receive crops or food aid; they maintain livestock herds. Likewise, many rural households receive financial or in-kind support through their urban connections. These linkages allow extended households to manage risk, smooth consumption, and adapt in response to shocks and seasonal fluctuations. We hypothesize that the strong rural-urban linkages are key components to increased resiliency of households, particularly in times of stress and in the face of changing livelihood systems in the region.

In the absence of additional data, it is difficult to ascribe clear causality between a strong rural connection and a successful life in town. That said, the importance of these rural-urban linkages is further highlighted by the cases in which they are absent. This is most apparent in the continued vulnerability of widows and abandoned women who do not or cannot maintain their links to the villages. We found a similar pattern in recent work in Gulu town in Acholi, where women who had lost ties their rural homes were disproportionately disadvantaged (Stites et al., 2019). Most of the women in Karamoja who lack these connections fled these locations due to abuse, mistreatment, or neglect. Dependent on towns, these women and their children lack the rural component that appears to underpin the success of many other urban migrants. For example, these female-headed households do not receive crops or livestock from the rural areas, they do not travel to these locations for seasonal cultivation, and they cannot send children to rural relatives for assistance with their upbringing.

The majority of respondents in this study had been living in their respective urban locations for five years or less. It is possible that the importance of the rural connection diminishes over time as an individual and his/her household members become more deeply enmeshed in the urban economy and way of life. In other words, in cases of “successful” migration, will urban livelihood strategies eventually crowd out the need for rural linkages? Certainly, some members of the study population who had lived in towns for longer periods were better off. Examples include a man who had been in Kotido for more than ten years and owned his own small shop, and another who had lived in Kotido for seven years and had a regular job at the petrol station. A widow who had lived in Kotido for more than ten years was making a profit of up to UGX 14,000 a day selling donuts, while another widow and eight-year resident had a successful brewing operation using loans from her VSLA.

These examples point to the acquisition of greater economic stability over time. It is, of course, entirely possible that these individuals possess characteristics that make them likely to succeed regardless of how long they lived in town. Indeed, there were several other long-term residents who faced daily struggles similar to those of more recent arrivals. Taken as a whole, however, the study data imply that economic stability increases with the amount of time that an individual has been living in the urban area. Again, those people that stay may be doing so *because* they are successful. Yet the existence of widows in the study population who had lived in town for long periods and were generally doing better than the more recent arrivals implies a connection between duration of stay and successful livelihood outcomes. Social connections, diverse economic strategies, and building a savings base appear to be key in creating urban resilience. We stress that these data are limited and more research is needed to draw definitive conclusions in this regard.

## **Conclusions and implications**

### *Planning for urban growth*

This study did not assess the capabilities of urban areas in northern Karamoja to handle population influxes. Observations and anecdotal conversations, however, imply limited capacity in this regard. This challenge is not unique, and the literature review demonstrated that few small cities in East Africa undertake urban plans. Furthermore, national governments may erect barriers to rural-urban migration in an attempt to reduce the proliferation of urban slums or to ensure an agricultural labor force. For example, Ethiopia discourages relocating to cities and has laws requiring urban registration cards for employment, although this regulation is not uniformly enforced (De Brauw et al., 2013). The Kampala government attempts to actively prevent residents of Karamoja from settling in the large urban centers in the south of the country (namely Jinja and Kampala) through policies of abuse, incarceration, and forced return (Lochomin 2010, Delaney 2011). At the same time, the government is implementing policies that restrict pastoral mobility (such as land gazettement and preventing herd movement across district borders) and favor sedentary crop production in Karamoja.<sup>20</sup> These policies, coupled with the growing inequality of livestock holdings in the region, will likely continue to push people out of pastoralism. In addition, the ecological unsuitability of much of the region for regular cultivation and the increased unpredictability brought by climate change are likely to increase the vulnerability of those who shift entirely to crop production. As rural populations lose livelihoods, urban areas will continue to grow.

Long-term and sustained investments in the sub-regions towns and cities will be central to poverty reduction and development. Such investments would include natural resource management, transportation and communication infrastructure, and financial services. Ideally, the local and national authorities would also seek to facilitate and maximize remittances, monitor circular migration, ensure the rights of migrant workers in both rural and urban areas, and manage labor supply and demand (Black et al. 2006). Gender considerations are largely absent from legal and policy frameworks related to migration in Uganda (Mulumba and Olema 2009), but should be taken into account in planning on how to support the migration and livelihood strategies of men and women of different ages.

Educational opportunities were a pull factor for a segment of the migrants sampled in this study, while others appreciated the improved access to education for their children once in town. Approximately 75% of respondents with school-age children had some or all of their children in schools. Although we do not have comparative data for the rural areas, we feel confident that ease of access and greater integration into the cash economy means that urban enrollment rates are higher than those in the rural sending areas. Furthermore, when migrant families do not send their children to school the barriers appear to be primarily financial. This is in contrast to rural households who, while also facing financial barriers, may keep children out of school because of reliance on children's contribution to household livelihoods and because of lack of exposure to education on the part of the parents or community.

Karamoja is in need of more efficient and proactive management of natural resources. Policy makers and programmers may assume a dichotomy between rural and urban areas, in which rural residents depend on natural resources while their urban counterparts rely on their physical labor. In reality, many urban residents also depend heavily on natural resources. These are found in peri-urban areas, rural surroundings, or are "hidden" within settled areas. These include urban farming, use of public areas for grazing, and extraction of soil or rocks for brickmaking or sale, to name a few (Twyman and Slater 2005). Karamoja is a prime example of the continuum of rural and urban livelihoods, described

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<sup>20</sup> The government continues to promote sedentarized agriculture as a livelihood in Karamoja, as evident in, among other sources, its Karamoja Action Plan for Food Security (KAPFS 2010), which is almost entirely about agricultural production. At the time of this research, the negative view of pastoralism reached high levels of government, as evidenced in a 2010 letter from Janet Museveni, Minister of State for Karamoja, to the head of the EU delegation: "We know that the dangers of pastoralism outweigh its benefits, and Karamoja is a perfect testimony of that. The people suffer endlessly, generation after generation, because they are depending on old methods of work and their knowledge is never informed by any input from elsewhere."

by Twyman and Slater, in which natural resource extraction supplements urban lifestyles, and where urban livelihoods continue to overlap with rural systems even after migration.

While the rural-urban continuum allows for social linkages and diversified livelihoods, the continued reliance on natural resource extraction by a growing urban population in northern Karamoja has serious consequences for the environment in the surrounding rural areas. The most obvious problem is deforestation through fuel collection. Most people in the three towns covered in this study cook with charcoal and firewood, as do restaurants, street vendors, etc. Cultural and economic factors make it unlikely that people will transition to electric stoves even if the power grid does eventually reach these towns. Brickmaking, a major cottage industry, relies heavily on charcoal and firewood.

Other natural resources are increasingly important in livelihood strategies in Karamoja as individuals and entire households exit pastoralism. These include gravel and marble quarrying, gold mining, and excavation of soil for brickmaking. Many of these industries are informal, unregulated, and workers (including children) are subject to exploitation. That said, employment in these sectors is an important component of the livelihood strategies of many households, including those in urban areas or split between rural and urban locations.

As discussed throughout this report, many of the female-headed households in towns face specific and pronounced vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities arise from a variety of factors, including limited social, human, and financial capital and a high dependency ratio. Most of these women also lack the linkages to rural areas, which provided other respondents with access to agricultural land, a place to send children, food crops, and social support. Unlike many other respondents in this study, the women who had been widowed or abandoned prior to moving to town did not migrate out of free will; most did so because they had no other choice, and some were forcibly driven from their homes by abusive husbands or other relatives. These women are likely to remain in urban areas.

One of the areas in which these women struggled was in accessing land for cultivation; even those who could access land had difficulty in clearing the land without male relatives. With this in mind, an urban gardening project could be successful, with women working in groups to help each other prepare and cultivate their individual plots. An intervention could include perma-gardening demonstrations, provision of initial inputs, and training in accessing markets for those interested or able to sell a portion of their output. Other programs targeting female-headed households could include microloans, accommodation support, educational support for children, and specifically tailored high-quality trainings for vocational skills, business skills, or adult literacy.

We end this report with a reminder of the important role that small towns can play in economic development and poverty alleviation (Baker 1990). Urban migration can be a story of opportunity and success not only for the migrants and their rural relatives, but also for the economies of their destination locations. Successful migration is more likely when migrants are able to find accommodation, have equitable access to services which are supported and maintained (sanitation, education, transportation, health care, financial services), and can find employment. A lack of funds from the federal government frequently hampers effective service delivery at the district level, but this is only likely to change when district officials have the knowledge and capacity to advocate for the aspects that are required. In order for this to occur, district officials must view population growth as an opportunity for development, as opposed to a nuisance.

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