

Karamoja Resilience Support Unit

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The 2022 Humanitarian Crisis in Karamoja: Findings from a real-time review



Introduction

In July 2022 the Ugandan media reported that 900 people had died of hunger or hunger-related diseases in the Karamoja sub-region since February 2022, and that 8 out of 10 households had limited or no food.ⁱ The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) estimated that out of a total population of 1.4 million people, about 518,000 people from Karamoja's poorest families faced critical food insecurity, and of these, 428,000 people were experiencing crisis levels of food insecurity (Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) phase 3), and 90,000 were at emergency levels of food insecurity (IPC phase 4). For the first time in three years, all nine districts of Karamoja were at crisis level or worse according to IPC classification. In late July 2022, the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) reported the number of fatalities in Karamoja due to the "food insecurity crisis" at 2,465.

Although government and aid agencies responded to the humanitarian crisis in Karamoja, the level of human suffering and mortality outlined above indicates that this response was either late or inadequate, or both. This briefing paper is based on a real-time review of the events that contributed to the crisis, the extent to which early warning systems provided sufficient advance warning, and the timing and nature of the response.ⁱⁱ The review took place in September and October 2022 and included field assessments in Moroto, Nabilatuk and Kaabong districts in Karamoja and key informant interviews in Karamoja and Kampala. Key informants were selected from national and local government and international and local NGOs. The review drew on the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) disaster risk model to explore multiple hazards, levels of hazard exposure, and underlying

community and household vulnerabilities and capabilities in the crisis affected districts.

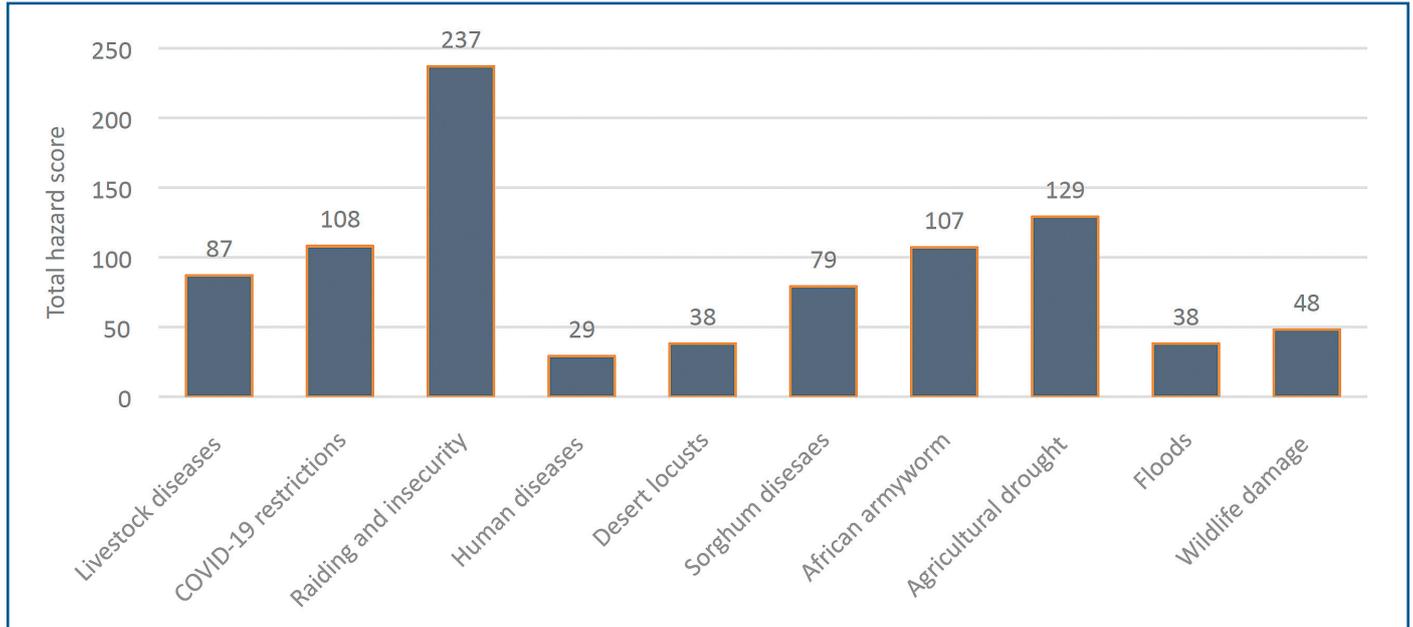
Key findings

Causes of the crisis: immediate and deep-rooted factors

Hazard timelines developed with community groups showed that 2019 was a relatively 'good year' in Karamoja. In stark contrast, 2020, 2021 and 2022 were characterised by multiple hazards, occurring within a context of COVID-19 restrictions: African armyworm, agricultural drought,ⁱⁱⁱ crop diseases, desert locusts, human and livestock diseases and, in locations in Nabilatuk and Kaabong, floods and wild animals respectively. These hazards severely affected sorghum and livestock production in Karamoja's agro-pastoral livelihood zones. Key informants confirmed this analysis, explaining that the negative impacts of multiple hazards were further compounded by volatile food and livestock prices and inflated lean-season food prices, the result of COVID-19 restrictions and the Russia-Ukraine war. Most hazards have been present in Karamoja for decades and partly account for persistently high poverty rates; the Uganda Bureau of Statistics reported multidimensional poverty in the region at around 85% of the total sub-region population.^{iv}

While recognising the multi-hazard nature of the crisis, community groups scored the different hazards to explain their relative contribution to the crisis. These hazard scores showed that livestock theft, commercial raiding and associated insecurity was viewed as the most important. This was followed by agricultural drought, and COVID-19 restrictions (the closure of food and livestock markets) and African armyworm (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Community scoring of hazards contributing to the 2022 humanitarian crisis



How did early warning systems report the crisis?

Customary, sub-regional, national, and international early warning systems are well-established in Karamoja. Each of these systems forecast the 2022 humanitarian crisis at some level. For example, in July 2021, District Drought Bulletins^v recommended the use of drought contingency funds for two sub-districts; this recommendation was extended to all nine districts in August 2022 noting that ‘... it is necessary to respond to the impact of last year’s poor harvest, which has continued to manifest itself in the form of very low household food stocks. Contingency plans should be activated because the livestock sector continues to be affected by parasites and tick-borne diseases, coupled with raids and livestock theft.’

At the national level too, the Uganda National Meteorological Authority provided timely alerts of delayed and erratic seasonal rains in 2021 and again in 2022. Similarly, international early warning service providers - FEWSNET and the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) group - produced detailed food security reports and clear forecasts from October 2019 onwards. For example, the April 2022 a FEWSNET bulletin reported the continued deteriorating food security to IPC 3 or above from, ‘27% of the total population of Karamoja in June 2020, rising to 30% in April 2021 and to 41% in April 2022’. The bulletin listed Kaabong, Kotido, Moroto and Nabilatuk as the districts of greatest concern.

The real-time review noted that as the crisis evolved, people tried to cope by generating income to help fill gaps in ‘lean’ and crisis seasons. Many of their activities were highly dependent on local natural resources, and the collection of firewood and charcoal production were potentially

damaging to local natural capital in the long term. Women also relied more on the brewing of alcohol, while young men distributed and sold ‘waragi’ - an imported home-made crude liquor or commercial gin with very high levels of alcohol - another income generating activity that has profoundly negative outcomes on human and social capital.

What was the humanitarian response?

District offices of Chief Administrative Officers provided the review team with dashboard-level detail of the humanitarian response at district-level. This information was cross-checked with community groups, who developed humanitarian response timeline. Both the dashboards and community timelines confirmed that government and NGOs provided little if any humanitarian assistance in 2020 and 2021. It was only after the Ugandan media and Members of Parliament reported human hunger-related death to the national parliament after June to July 2022 that much of the humanitarian assistance was mobilised.

The multiple-hazard induced crisis in Karamoja coincided with and was deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions, and the Russia-Ukraine war and the resultant global cost-of-living crisis. **These events and challenges aside, the pace and scale of the humanitarian response in the Karamoja fell well below the level and quality of anticipated responses as outlined in district multi-hazard contingency plans.**

It was also evident that large-scale development programmes in Karamoja - with considerable financial resources - were unable to contain seasonal spikes in human, livestock and crop diseases as part of their routine

work. Diseases across multiple sectors compounded the impact of other hazards. In the same way, UN agencies with food assistance and agriculture mandates were unable to contain seasonally inflated food prices e.g., through innovative support to local producer and community groups to procure and store their own food. A further concern was the outflow of locally produced sorghum to other districts, including to other areas of Uganda.

An important mechanism for supporting early response to crisis is the use of flexible funding in development projects, sometimes called ‘crisis modifiers’. Although this mechanism has been used to good effect in crisis-prone areas of East Africa^{vi}, the review team found no evidence of the piloting or mainstreamed use of crisis modifiers and other innovative flexible development-humanitarian funding facilities, in the period leading-up to the humanitarian crisis of 2022.

How were humanitarian responses coordinated?

Throughout 2020, 2021 and 2022 humanitarian response coordination actors met under assorted structures and institutions. For example, at the national level the Ministry for Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees and the Ministry for Karamoja Affairs (both in the Office of the Prime Minister), the Karamoja Parliamentary Group, the Karamoja Development Partners Group, and the UN Humanitarian Coordination Team all have coordination mandates. However, the review team found no clear evidence of early and sustained engagement in addressing the deepening crisis in Karamoja.

At the sub-region level, the Karamoja Nutrition and Health Partners Coordination Meeting was convened monthly in person and virtually. Since July 2022 however, these coordination meetings have become weekly as part of UNICEF’s wider ‘surge’ humanitarian response. The ‘surge’ has also seen an expansion of nutrition screening and a resultant increase in the number of children treated for severe acute malnutrition from around 1,500 to more than 4,000 a month since January 2022. At local government district-level, the District Disaster Management Committees coordinate the work of district departmental heads, the Uganda Red Cross Society, and international and local NGOs that are operational in the district. These committees have played a highly effective role in targeting available humanitarian resources to the most vulnerable.

Despite the considerable coordination potential at national, sub-regional and district levels, the review team could find little evidence that these structures created and sustained the necessary levels of leadership, reporting and influence that were required to build a timely, appropriate

and credible humanitarian response in Karamoja.

Furthermore, while the current nutrition and health-focused humanitarian ‘surge’ response will doubtless help to save lives, it will not avert the wider livelihood crisis, recently exacerbated by a poor 2022 harvest and inadequate food stocks. The review team also noted the forecasts for deepening levels of hunger in 2023 and predicted that hunger would be affected by the continued export sale of grain.

Significantly, from the perspective of preventing malnutrition and hunger, crisis-affected communities in Karamoja prioritize livelihoods support for livestock and income generation. While these priorities are well recognised and articulated in District hazard-based contingency plans, without adequate funding and the pro-active support of international development partners, these plans have limited practical value. As one key informant commented, ‘a plan without funds isn’t a plan it just occupies shelf-space’. This said, other key informants rightly point out that funding alone will not address disaster risk reduction capacity gaps in sub-regional and district-level government and international NGOs; for example, there is an urgent need to build capacity in humanitarian standards for economic recovery (MERS), livestock interventions (LEGS) and crop interventions (SEADS).^{vii}

While it is evident that much more could have been done to protect lives and livelihoods in Karamoja, community groups and key informants recognised that livestock theft, commercial raiding and insecurity were major causes of the current crisis. After a decade of relative peace, stability and development from 2009 - 2019, the recent violent loss of thousands of livestock is a bitter step backwards. Human protection is a key principle of humanitarian standards, and livelihoods support - such as livestock and crop support - can only be provided at scale if people are safe in their fields and gardens, and when herding their animals. Insecurity also affects the implementation of development programmes and the private sector investment that are required to address Karamoja’s very high levels of multi-dimensional poverty.

Recommendations

Karamoja is experiencing a multi-hazard, multi-year crisis due to very high levels of multi-dimensional poverty, highly eroded household resilience-levels, multiple and severe local hazards, and deepening global economic and food crises. Therefore, recommendations across various sectors were proposed.

Humanitarian response and coordination:

- Expand and extend mass screening and the treatment of severely acute malnourished children - under the age of 59 months - and mothers in all districts,

through to December 2023,

- Expand and extend the protection-ration for households with a malnourished child to all sub-counties in crisis-affected areas through to December 2023,
- Undertake a food availability assessment for the forthcoming lean season and as required, extend the provision of a protective ration of food assistance to all households in need,
- Establish a monthly hybrid (in-person and on-line) Karamoja Emergency Committee, co-chaired by the Ministry of State for Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees and the Ministry for Karamoja Affairs, to coordinate the Karamoja Emergency Response.

Governance and security:

- The Ministry for Karamoja Affairs, the Parliamentary Group, Uganda Peoples' Defence Force, Uganda Police Force and an independent conflict specialist organisation form a new High-level Peace and Reconciliation Taskforce to address raiding, roadside banditry, and the excessive use of force by security actors. The Taskforce will bring raiders, community leaders, traders, security and local government personnel allegedly involved in commercial raiding to account,
- Representatives of the High-level Taskforce meet counterparts in Kenya to pilot a transhumance system that requires Turkana pastoralists to Kenya for a minimum of three months each year.

Resilience:

- Development programmes have substantial resources. It is recommended that donors review the objectives and activities of their programming, in the light of the poor response to the current crisis, and pilot and institutionalise more flexible development delivery systems including the pivoting of development assistance funds and crisis modifiers,

- The Ministry for Karamoja Affairs, the Karamoja Parliamentary Group and Uganda Police Force and an organisation specialising in substance abuse, form a joint *Waragi* Control Taskforce to end the transport and sale of illegal hard liquor in Karamoja,
- The Ministry for Karamoja seeks international development partner support for a five-year pilot social protection programme for the most vulnerable groups in the sub-region.

Livestock support:

- Livestock departments in government and international organisations undertake a *Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards* (LEGS) initial assessment and use the participatory response identification matrix (PRIM) to develop a sub-regional livestock recovery plan.

Crop support:

- Government and International development partners should consider how the export of cereals from Karamoja in poor and crisis years affects food security. In these years, the option of Increased support to local producer and community groups to bulk and store locally produced grain for subsequent sale within the sub-region, warrants further analysis.
- While regarded as hazards, agricultural drought, crop diseases and floods are better classified as development challenges that can be addressed through 10-year regenerative agriculture project. Located within the Nabuin Zonal Agricultural Research and Development Institute and working collaboratively with relevant INGOs, the project would identify soil management methods that build soil health and associated productivity in Karamoja's agropastoral zones and 'Green Belt'. Proven methods could be scaled-up through mentoring support to district agricultural extension staff and farmer groups.

Acknowledgements

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Karamoja Resilience Support Unit (KRSU)

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Endnotes

- ⁱ Emwamu, S. P. 2022. Hunger kills 900 in Karamoja - leaders. *Monitor*, July 25, 2022. <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/special-reports/hunger-kills-900-in-karamoja-leaders-3891186>.
- ⁱⁱ Cullis, A. and Arasio, R.L. 2022. The 2022 Humanitarian Crisis in Karamoja, Uganda: A real-time review. Karamoja Resilience Support Unit, Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University, Kampala. https://karamojaresilience.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/TUFTS_2261_KRSU_Humanitarian_Crisis_V2_P19_adjust_online.pdf
- ⁱⁱⁱ An unseasonal break in the rains during the growing season that adversely affects crop production and yields.
- ^{iv} Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2022b. Multidimensional poverty index report. https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/08_2022Multi_Poverty_Dimensional_Index_Report_2022.pdf
- ^v These bulletins were produced by the European Union-funded Pro-Resilience Action Early Warning System project and Implemented by the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations in all nine districts in Karamoja.
- ^{vi} Catley, A., and R. Charters. 2016. Early response to drought in pastoralist areas: Lessons from the USAID crisis modifier in East Africa. USAID/East Resilience Learning Project, USAID/East Africa, Nairobi. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00M1PX.pdf
- ^{vii} These are three sets of global humanitarian standards, linked to the Sphere Handbook under the Humanitarian Standards Partnership: Minimum Economic Recovery Standards (MERS), Livestock Emergency Standards and Guidelines (LEGS), and Standards for Supporting Crop-related Livelihoods in Emergencies (SEADS).