

# HOW ARE THE KARAMOJONG POLITICALLY MARGINALISED?

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## Abstract

The paper discusses the overlooked political marginalisation of Karamojong pastoralists in Uganda, contrary to a commonly held belief that ecological factors and pastoralism are the leading contributors to poverty and underdevelopment in Karamoja.<sup>1</sup> Anchored within the theoretical strand of marginalisation, this article discusses how the actions of those operating at the centre of power perpetuate persistent poverty in Karamoja. A particular focus is placed on political representation, resource allocation and the engagement of local people in poverty eradication and development. The paper argues that the grants from central government are meagre and misguided, Karamoja is poorly and ineffectively represented at policy levels, and the local people have a limited voice in poverty alleviation and development programmes. The paper concludes that Karamoja's persistent poverty is to a great extent a product of political marginalisation. Finally, it recommends affirmative action, effective local leadership, sensitisation and involvement of local people in poverty alleviation initiatives and combating corruption in public offices.

**KEYWORDS:** Political marginalisation, pastoralism, anti-pastoralist policy, climatic conditions, political representation, resource allocation, engagement of local people, persistent poverty, Karamoja (Uganda)

## Relevance of the article

There are a significant number of studies about political marginalisation of pastoralists in other pastoral areas in the Horn and rest of Africa, but there is a scarcity of studies with an explicit focus on Karamoja's political marginalisation as a leading cause of persistent poverty. This article debunks the false

- 1 The main version of this paper was presented to the International Institute of Social Studies at Erasmus University Rotterdam in 2020. Through a qualitative methodology, the earlier study conducted two sets of semi-structured interviews with government and NGO officials who were directly or indirectly involved in poverty alleviation and development programmes in Karamoja. Data were obtained through purposive sampling. The study used snowball sampling to obtain data from local community members in Longerep and Kalogwang villages in Kotido District. Secondary data were also used in the arguments.

narrative that the persistence of poverty in Karamoja is caused by climatic conditions and pastoralism. Such a misguided official narrative often obscures the deliberate historical, socioeconomic and political processes that cause Karamoja to lag in terms of development.

In comparison with other pastoralist communities, Karamoja presents a more suitable case for examining marginalisation. The region is endowed with a variety of mineral deposits, it has one of the largest national game parks in the country and is host to some game reserves. In addition, there is a dedicated ministry in charge of Karamoja Affairs. However, the region has consistently remained poor and underdeveloped. The article contributes to the wider literature on the political marginalisation of pastoralists.

## Introduction

Karamoja is a semi-arid sub-region of north-eastern Uganda. The inhabitants of Karamoja (normally referred to collectively as the Karamojong) are predominantly pastoralists occupying the nine districts of Nabilatuk, Amudat, Nakapiripirit, Napak, Moroto, Kotido, Kaabong, Karenga and Abim, with a total population of about 1.2 million people (Okoth 2020). The region covers an area of 10,550 square miles, almost the size of Belgium (Howe, Stites and Akabwai 2015).

Karamoja is the least developed region in Uganda, with 61 per cent of its population living in poverty (UBOS 2016): 24 per cent lives in chronic poverty, more than twice the national average of 10 per cent. Only 17 per cent of the population lives within the 5-kilometre distance recommended for access to health care, compared to 86 per cent nationwide. Karamoja has a 25 per cent literacy rate, compared to Kampala's 94 per cent, and 60 per cent of its women are illiterate (UNFPA 2018). Karamoja had the highest percentage of unpaved national roads (99 per cent) and the smallest percentage of grid electricity (1 per cent), compared to Kampala's 86 per cent. Karamoja has the second-highest poverty rate in Uganda at 66 per cent, after Acholi (68 per cent) (UBOS 2021) and the 2022 *Multidimensional Poverty Index Report* from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics reports the 'highest levels of multidimensional poverty, poverty intensity and MPI, at 85 per cent, 68 per cent and 0.58 respectively' in Karamoja (UBOS 2022). Given the situation on the ground in Karamoja and its continuous political marginalisation, there are differences in how it faces marginalisation as compared with other pastoralists, so this sub-region presents an ideal case study of the political marginalisation of pastoral communities.

The official narrative by government and development partners of climatic conditions and pastoralism as the leading causes of persistent poverty

in Karamoja is applied to hide the historical socioeconomic and political processes that have relegated Karamoja to the fringes. These processes can be traced during both the colonial and post-colonial periods. By 1894, Uganda became a British Protectorate and in 1898 Karamoja was the last part of the country to be conquered. Karamoja offered only limited attraction to the colonialists in the form of the elephant tusk trade, adventuring and hunting. It became a closed district: it had no motor roads, the only means of transport was portage and a large part of it remained unadministered by the colonial regime (Wayland 1931). The closure of Karamoja reinforced a policy of sedentarisation and economic isolation of the region (Gray 2000). Forced cattle sales ensued to ‘modernise’ its economy despite sharp resistance from people.

The first president of independent Uganda, Dr Apollo Milton Obote, realised that it would take time for Karamoja to catch up with the rest of the country. He made a notorious statement on a visit to Karamoja in 1963: ‘We shall not wait for Karamoja to develop.’ (*Monitor* 2012; Ayoo, Opio and Kakisa 2013: 17) This implied that his government did not possess the political will to develop the sub-region. So, there was no time for the government to develop Karamoja! The poverty and marginalisation of Karamoja became normalised. Most post-colonial presidents maintained a ‘special status’ for Karamoja in terms of administration, but with very limited efforts towards development progress or economic investment. This anti-pastoralist policy by central government has been maintained into the present day. In 1986, Yoweri Kaguta Tibuhabwe Museveni toppled Okello Tito’s government and he still serves as the current president of Uganda. He belongs to the Bahima ethnic group of traditional cattle herders. Despite his own pastoralist background, Yoweri Museveni led a personal crusade in his autobiography in 1997 to ‘eliminate nomadism’ among his people, ‘urging and assisting the pastoralists of North Ankole to settle down and modernize certain aspects of their otherwise archaic, rough and inadequate lives’ (Morton 2010: 20). This promotion of a sedentary lifestyle is reflected in the national policy on pastoralism. The government currently categorise Karamoja as a ‘hard to reach area’ (Aberra and Abdulahi 2015: 221). This means the region is in urgent need of special and priority development, according to the government.

For decades, poverty alleviation and development programmes were implemented in Karamoja by the government and development partners, but these have not lifted the region from persistent poverty. The current famine in Karamoja, for instance, is killing many children and the elderly (Emwamu 2022). Karamoja has natural resources that could transform its status quo if tapped, but unfortunately, this cannot be done due to the region’s political marginalisation. Although a ministry is dedicated to the region, there is no tangible evidence on the ground that this ministry is serving its intended purpose. These

are some of the ways in which Karamoja is different from other pastoral areas.

Drawing on existing literature and primary sources, this article defines political marginalisation as a result of deliberate and determined actions of those operating at the centre of power. The article examines these actions from the perspectives of political representation, resource allocation and engagement or participation of local people in poverty alleviation and development programmes. Karamoja lacks representatives from the region in top government positions such as cabinet ministers and permanent secretaries. Yet these are the venues where key policies and resource allocations are decided. Karamoja receives very little funding from central government, and locals are largely voiceless in most poverty alleviation programmes. These are leading contributors to persistent poverty in the sub-region.

In the sections below, the paper presents the research design, data collection and analysis. This is followed by the literature review on political marginalisation, a discussion of the findings, conclusion and recommendations.

## Research approach and design

The study used both primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through informal semi-structured online interviews, with the help of a research assistant, Isaiah Lodou Keno, an undergraduate university finalist, youth leader and resident of Kotido with experience in conducting qualitative interviews. Travel restrictions during the Covid-19 lockdown necessitated the use of a locally based research assistant. He sent the audio records of the interviews and field notes to me for analysis. Secondary data sources included analysis of policy documents of government and NGOs, research reports and the local media.

Two sets of qualitative semi-structured interviews were employed:

1. Key informants: government and NGO experts/officials (elites) directly/indirectly involved in poverty alleviation and development programmes in Karamoja. Data were obtained from them through purposive sampling. The study conducted 90 per cent phone video interviews in August and September 2020. The research assistant covered the 10 per cent in a face to face interview for those that could not be reached via the internet. A total of 25 key informants from Moroto, Nakapiripirit, Kotido, Kaabong and Abim were interviewed, five for each district.
2. The local community: local people from Longerep and Kalogwang villages of Watakau parish in Nakapelimoru sub-county, Kotido district. The research assistant collected data from these participants. Snowball sampling was done to interview 24 individuals (12 male and 12 female); each

participant interviewed referred another person to be interviewed. Snowball sampling was used because of the characteristic of the respondents: men graze livestock in the fields while women do domestic tasks. The topics covered in the interviews were resource allocation, representation and the engagement of local people in poverty and development initiatives.

## Literature review

Colonialism offered the starting point for the political marginalisation of most pastoralists in Africa. To illustrate the negative colonial attitudes towards pastoralism in Kenya, Catley, Lind and Scoones (2013: 151) cited Huxley (1948: 89): 'these obstinately conservative nomads, wandering with their enormous herds from pasture to pasture, seem like dinosaurs, survivors from a past age with a dying set of values ... aristocratic, manly, free, doomed'. Similarly, Charles Elliot, appointed a Commissioner of British East Africa in 1902, who grabbed Maasai land for European settlement, wrote: 'I cannot admit that wandering tribes have a right to keep other and superior races [sic] out of large tracts merely because they have acquired the habit of straggling over far more land than they can utilise.' (Markakis 2004: 7, citing Dyson-Hudson 1985) The colonialists considered the vast tracts of land occupied by pastoralists as wastelands. Attempts were made to 'modernise' the pastoralists' way of life, such as agricultural modernisation in accordance with western precedents (Scott 2008). This laid a foundation for the marginalisation and exclusion of pastoralists.

An example of bad policies designed by the central government is the establishment of the Karamoja Cattle Scheme (KCS) to achieve 'three developmental goals': destocking and turning the 'stubborn' pastoralists towards a sedentary life; raising funds for the local administration; and providing proteins (beef diet) for the urban population (Quam 1978: 56–62). Cattle sales became compulsory, and further, a meat processing industry was established in Soroti in the neighbouring Teso District that was to rely on the supply of livestock from Karamoja. There were early suggestions by people in Karamoja that if such a facility were built in Karamoja, transport costs would reduce and chances of beefing up security by government would be high. Karamoja remained underdeveloped and poor because of bad attitudes behind policies regarding Karamoja's development (Aberra and Abdulahi 2015).

Marginalisation and exclusion are closely connected. Cleary, Horsfall and Escott (2014) postulate social exclusion as a by-product of marginalisation; however, Born and Jensen (2002), Gatzweiler et al. (2011), Braun and Gatzweiler (2014), and Mowat (2015) are of the opinion that the terms can

be used interchangeably. Both exclusion and marginalisation entail violations of the rights and privileges of the people: political participation, freedom of speech/expression, equality of opportunity and rule of law. The state, which is the chief custodian of the above rights, is not neutral but ‘a vehicle of the dominant classes in a society’ (Bhalla and Lapeyre 1997: 420).

Comprehensively, marginality is ‘an involuntary position and condition of an individual or group at the margins of social, political, economic, ecological and biophysical systems, preventing them from access to resources, assets, services, restraining freedom of choice, preventing the development of capabilities, and eventually causing extreme poverty’ (Gatzweiler et al. 2011: 3). Therefore, marginality is a state of being marginalised, peripheralised or neglected, and political marginalisation is a result of deliberate actions that maintain or cause this condition.

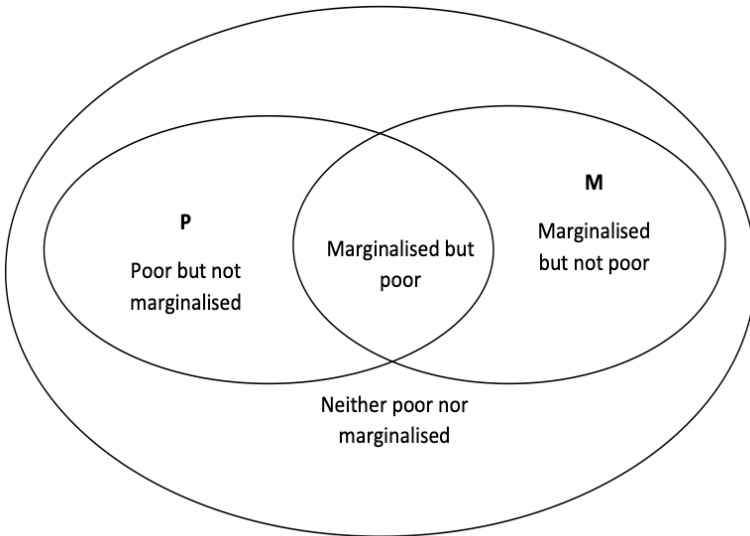
The experiences of the people of Karamoja match the marginalised state of living. As will be shown in the findings, the local communities live with an awareness about their marginalised state. This observation is supported by Mowat’s statement: ‘To be marginalised is to have a sense that one does not belong and, in so doing, to feel that one is neither a valued member of a community and able to make a valuable contribution within that community nor able to access the range of services and/or opportunities open to others.’ (Mowat 2015: 457) However, Braun and Gatzweiler (2014) warn that marginality and poverty are complementary concepts; they do not exist independently, but overlap. With the aim of identifying the underlying contributors to poverty, marginality encompasses broad approaches and offers an interdisciplinary and systemic perspective on the lives of the poor.

## Karamoja, a suitable location for examining marginalisation

There are some specific conditions that characterise the marginalisation of the Karamojong. First and foremost, remoteness is one key factor. Karamoja depicts what Gatzweiler et al. (2011) outline as the proximate reasons for the exclusion of marginalised poor and they include:

- i) living in unfavourable areas (poor or no transport infrastructure);
- ii) being socially or ethnically excluded or having lost their role or status in society;
- iii) being excluded from public services or poverty reduction programmes.

Table 1 shows that the marginalised poor (in this case, the Karamojong) are victims of both marginalisation and poverty.



**Table I:**

The marginalised poor

*Source:* Analysis adopted from Gatzweiler et al. (2011: 2).

Second, the size and political importance of an ethnic group in national politics matter (Raleigh 2010). Politically irrelevant ethnic groups are marginalised. In a study done in Thika District, one of the marginalised places in Kenya, Kinyanjui (2007) claims that exclusion from the centre of political power and appropriation caused poverty. In Karamoja, the situation is similar, but with some differences. The Karamojong are in a very poor position to exert pressure on the government to expand their rights, either through voting or protesting anti-pastoral policies. When an ethnic group like the Bahima (also cattle keepers, but more privileged because of their association with President Museveni) or Banyankole make demands or protest against unfavourable government policy, the government can listen and act faster, since they are better represented at policy and resource allocation levels than the Karamojong. However, remoteness and size or political importance as factors advanced for Karamoja's marginality are secondary to the deliberate actions taken by the power at the centre. Marginalisation occurs in political representation, resource allocation and engagement of the local people in poverty reduction and development programmes.



Political representation entails speaking and advocating by political actors on behalf of the people (Dovi 2006). Representation is dominantly political, and most causes and effects of marginalisation and exclusion relate to the political system (Born and Jensen 2002). Moreover, a relational view of poverty hints that ‘people are poor because of others [... They are] unable to control future events because others have more control over them’ (Mosse 2010: 1158, quoting Wood 2003: 456). The dominated rarely have a say in decision-making, and this kind of marginalisation through lack of participation in decision-making drives the communities affected into extreme poverty (Leavy and Howard 2013).

In recent times, peripheral areas like the Marasabit (Kenya) and Karamoja regions have experienced massive extension of state power through decentralisation and patronage. Typically, government rewards local leaders in such areas with wealth and material possessions in order to implement policies that are not in the interest of local people (Czuba 2011, 2017 and 2019; see also Mosse 2010). Educated elites who turn to politics are co-opted into the main stream by the state and often distance themselves from their own people (Markakis 2004) while concentrating on amassing personal wealth. In Mali, the rent-seeking practice of the local officials’ ‘belly politics’ perpetuates marginalisation. Benjaminsen and Ba (2009: 71) cited Paulson, Gezon and Watts (2003: 209)’s understanding of politics ‘as the practices and processes through which power, in its multiple forms, is wielded and negotiated’. In Karamoja, the use of patronage by the state to achieve total political dominance makes it very hard for other political parties to operate. Rupasingha and Goetz expanded their analysis of poverty from income and ethnic polarisation to political influence and the more ‘complex, non-economic and difficult-to-measure processes that occur within communities’ (2007: 668). Their study found lower poverty rates in counties with more competition between the leading two political parties and where the voting is balanced, in the sense that election results are closer. In other words, electoral politics does not fully represent the interests of the people in Karamoja: ‘This debate takes discussion well beyond the narrow confines of “good governance” and democracy, showing some of the “complex ways in which the politics of clientelism and citizenship are intertwined”’ (Mosse 2010: 1167 quoting Hickey and Du Toit, 2007: 14).

One can be marginalised according to ‘government policy’, ‘disenfranchised through poverty’, race and ethnicity, and in other ‘subtle’ ways (Mowat 2015: 458). Kandagor (2005) argues that government policies focus on the interests of agricultural populations and urban dwellers, and where governments have included pastoralists into civil service, state security and cabinet ministers, they remain inadequately represented. This is an example of how the government lacks a real focus on the interest of the Karamojong. To



understand better how inadequate representation is operationalised, Morton (2010) used the concept of governmentality to analyse governance in an environment of hostile attitudes towards pastoralists where lack of voice, political and economic factors are at play. He argues that policy is the most crucial constraint to poverty reduction among the pastoralists in Africa. He cited Turner (2005: 23–24), where Mary Mugenyi, Ugandan Minister of State for Animal Industries, criticised pastoralism: ‘In the livestock sector we continue to have nomads. Running around this country ... moving with their animals, spreading disease, living in very poor conditions’ (Morton 2010: 9). Mugenyi’s statement explains the anti-pastoral policy implemented by the government. Janet Museveni, Uganda’s First Lady and, at the time, Minister of Karamoja Affairs, also clearly showed the government’s lack of political interest in pastoralism: ‘We know that the dangers of pastoralism outweigh its benefits.’ (cited in Iyer and Stites 2021: 10) Most development interventions based on the above perception end up failing or further subjecting the already marginalised to worse conditions (Azarya 1996; see also Bird et al. 2002 and Heathcote 2012). Pastoral areas have been the target of large-scale global land-grabbing, involving investors in ‘the appropriation of enormous amounts of fertile land through “agrarian colonialism” by states and commercial agro-business; [and] the acquisition of wildlife-rich range areas by entrepreneurs practicing a sort of “environmental imperialism” to create private game parks and high-end tourist attractions’ (Catley, Lind and Scoones 2013: 14).

This study defines resources as annual budgetary allocations by the central government to different sectors, regions or districts. Mosse (2010) and Good (1999) argue that the systems or people such as state officials, local councils and police who allocate resources to the rural people apply their power to the disadvantage of the local population. Brady complements this by making the point that ‘Power and institutions cause policy, which causes poverty and moderates the relationship between behavior and poverty.’ (2019: 157) Similarly, decentralisation and state bureaucracy influence resource allocation. Pavanello (2009) criticises too much devolution when resources are transferred from central government to local levels. For example, the state does not provide the Fulani in Nigeria with adequate basic services like electricity, water, roads, health and educational facilities (Ogundairo and Ijimakinwa 2020).

The general effect of political marginalisation on African pastoralists is clearly stated by a Fulbe pastoralist from Burkina Faso: ‘the government is supporting the farmers, and only God is supporting the Fulbe [the pastoralists]’ (quoted in Benjaminsen and Ba 2009: 78 from Hagberg 2005: 51). In Uganda, political decision-making takes precedence during resource allocation. The executives allocate resources where they expect high political reward; for example, highly influential ethnic groups are allocated bigger shares compared

to less influential ones. The executives also tend to allocate larger resources to areas they hail from themselves.

Broadly, the power that a society has ‘depends upon the capacity of others [...] to impose social classifications upon them and then to speak on their behalf’ (Mosse 2010: 1166). Similarly, Leavy and Howard (2013: 6) argue that the powerful will use the media to keep the marginalised poor, and do whatever it takes to ensure that the local people remain ignorant about the rights and entitlements that would help them build their capabilities to achieve sustainable development: ‘The very poorest are less able to access infrastructure, services, support and opportunities. Where services exist, they are sometimes unavailable to the very poorest through a lack of information and knowledge of their existence, lack of transportation, hidden costs, short-term coping strategies which sacrifice long-term needs, along with social norms which inhibit certain marginalised groups’. (Leavy and Howard 2013: 6) The poor are not consulted in most poverty alleviation programmes, but are expected to participate in their implementation. Kabeer (2006) also points at lack of voice as a key dimension of poverty and that accounts for Karamoja’s position at the bottom of every development indicator.

## Findings

The discussion in this section is derived from a combination of primary data and an analysis of secondary data.

### *Political representation*

This study shows that persistent poverty in Karamoja is aided by further marginalisation and discrimination when it comes to top political appointments. ‘The Karamojong do not have the capacity and voice to push for their interests at policy levels. The minister of Karamoja Affairs comes from Ibanda district in western part of Uganda, he is not a Karamojong and he does not know the interests of the people of Karamoja.’ (field interview with Joseph Ayen Ongom, a businessman working with the charity Caritas Kotido Diocese in Abim, 2020). Despite protests from Karamoja, President Yoweri Museveni continues to appoint non-Karamojong as ministers in charge of Karamoja Affairs. In 2009, First Lady Janet Museveni (from western Uganda) was appointed as state minister of Karamoja Affairs, then as full minister for Karamoja Affairs with Barbara Oundo Nekesa (from the eastern region) as her deputy (*Observer* 2012). John Byabagambi (Ibanda, western Uganda) and Moses Kizige (Busoga sub-region) were appointed Cabinet Minister and State

Minister for Karamoja Affairs respectively from 2016 to 2021 (Nakatudde and Wanyama 2016). Currently, Maria Goretti Kitutu is the minister for Karamoja Affairs, and Agnes Nandutu is her junior minister. Both are from the eastern region (Manafwa and Bududa districts respectively). The people of Karamoja have protested such appointments (example below) but nothing has changed. Remigio Achia (Pian County MP and Chairperson of Karamoja Parliamentary Group), in a newspaper article, criticised the appointment of the current ministers for Karamoja Affairs, claiming they don't understand Karamoja:

We know even with the last parliament, we got ministers who were just tourists. They fly in, fly out. Those are tourists, now we have another two tourists brought again. They have again brought another two tourists to come and tour Karamoja. By the time their five years are done, they will probably not even have finished touring the whole region. What is the purpose of having a ministry called Karamoja Affairs, it is because the president has acknowledged that there is a problem facing the region. He knows, he has been part of the solutions to the region including disarmament and we're happy with that. (*Observer* 2021)

This deliberate action by the government to appoint non-Karamojong to represent the pastoralists' complex interests is bewildering, and it cannot result in any actual accommodation for the interests of Karamoja as far as poverty alleviation and development are concerned.

More so, at a national level, an independent survey by the *Observer* newspaper in 2013 listed 129 influential government jobs, including cabinet ministers, statutory bodies, department heads and permanent secretaries (Kakaire 2013). This list revealed that western and central regions had 48 and 38 of these positions respectively, taking the lion's share. In cabinet, western had 13 out of 30 available slots and central held 8 slots, while the north and east held 3 and 4 slots, respectively. It was found that no one from Karamoja was a full cabinet minister. Political relevance matters: western and central regions are more influential and relevant than Karamoja. They influence policies to favour the interests of their regions.

Lack of representation in top government positions is worsened by central government's anti-pastoralist policy. As a key informant for this study explained, '[the] pastoralist agenda doesn't fit well into the national agenda; it is given low priority. The Karamojong are considered a minority group, people who don't matter, their interests are not considered and in most times the authority responds to their plight after they have made a lot of noise' (field interview with Joel Achilla, ADP – Abim district, 2020). This biased policy accelerates Karamoja's marginalisation.

In addition, the Karamojong feel that they are poorly represented by their own leaders at the national levels:

To a larger extent, there is no effective representation, effective representation ended way back during times of leaders like the late Hon. Choudry of Kaabong, Hon. Paul Pulkol of Moroto and the late Hon. Omwony Ojwok of Abim. The three leaders were able to push for the Karamoja agenda at the national level. Since the current leaders from Karamoja rarely raise issues of national importance in parliament, then how would you expect them to raise issues of Karamoja? [...] [P]olitical representation is totally poor! If leaders would raise the problems facing Karamoja, roads would be tarmacked, electricity would've been extended all over the region and marble from Moroto would not be taken for processing in factories outside Karamoja like Tororo and others in Kampala. (field interview with Isaac Woyima, Abim district, 2020)

Still, elected leaders claim that they do their best to represent the interests of the region. 'Government handles Karamoja affairs, especially in regards to pastoralism through the ministry of agriculture. We also liaise with various development partners and NGOs to serve the region' (field interview with Hon. Aleper Margaret, MP –Woman Representative, Kotido district). Though the central government holds much of the blame for the failures in Karamoja, it was discovered that the elected leaders do not adequately represent their constituents. As soon as they become MPs, Karamoja MPs lose sight of their people's interests. An article in the *Observer* newspaper posits that the plights of the Karamojong are rarely heard, because of the silence from their MPs and local leaders (*Observer* 2022). It is not surprising that most of the MPs in parliament who have raised concerns about marginalisation in Karamoja come from other regions of Uganda (Karugaba 2022). Another respondent gave a different and contradictory opinion regarding the silence of Karamoja leaders on crucial matters in their constituencies. He mentioned the government's interference and intolerance as one factor making it impossible for Karamoja leaders to depart from political party caucus positions:

Due to political interference, we feel that MPs of Karamoja are bribed to prevent them for saying what they are supposed to say for their poor people and in most cases they don't turn up when invited to attend advocacy meetings intended to guard the rangeland or grazing land for the pastoralists yet we expect our MPs to table in parliament resolutions from such meetings, but it is not their interest. (field interview with Samson Okwir, Resource Rights Africa, Moroto district, 2020)

A similar study to understand the politics in Karamoja (Czuba 2019) reported that the NRM ruling party used the local leaders to maintain political dominance. This is another reason for the silence of Karamoja leaders. The local leaders were rewarded with wealth to squash the potential rise of opposition candidates in Karamoja. Czuba cited an interview with a local councillor in Karamoja:

I was the only member of opposition on the district council. They used to put a lot of pressure. They wanted to arrest me, said that it was treason, that I wanted to overthrow the state. In 2016, I had to join the NRM [the ruling party], for the safety of my life, for the safety of my position, and for the safety of my people. Because they vowed they wouldn't give any services to the people of [my community] if I stayed in opposition. So I joined the NRM and became the NRM flag bearer. (Czuba 2019: 9)

In a non-tolerant political system, where the centre is primarily focused on maintaining power, dissenting voices, such as pastoralist interests, are not tolerated. As a result of bribery and patronage by the state, promotion of personal interests and fear of repression from the centre, MPs and district leaders in Karamoja have chosen to remain silent in the face of poverty and marginalisation.

**Table 2.**

List of MPs from Karamoja showing their constituencies, districts and political affiliations

<b>MPs from Karamoja in the 11<sup>th</sup> Parliament (2021–2026)</b>			
<b>Name</b>	<b>Constituency</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>Political party</b>
Ochero Jimbricky Noman	Labwor County	Abim	NRM
Okori Moe Janet Grace Akech	District Woman Representative	Abim	NRM
Lolem Micah Akasile	Upe county	Amudat	NRM
Chelain Betty Louke	District Woman Representative	Amudat	NRM
Komol Emmanuel	Dodoch East County	Kaabong	Independent/ NRM-leaning
Komol Joseph Miidi	Dodoch North County	Kaabong	NRM
Lokwang Hillary	Ik County	Kaabong	NRM
Nakwang Christine Tubo	District Woman Representative	Kaabong	NRM
Baatom Ben Koryang	Dodoch West County	Karenga	NRM

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Lokwang Philiphs Ilukol	Napore West County	Karenga	NRM
Akello Rose Lilly	District Woman Representative	Karenga	NRM
Ismail Muhammad Lomwar	Kotido Municipality	Kotido	NRM
Lokii Peter Abrahams	Jie County	Kotido	NRM
Aleper Margaret Achilla	District Woman Representative	Kotido	NRM
Adome Francis Lorika	Moroto Municipality	Moroto	NRM
Lokii John Baptist	Matheniko County	Moroto	NRM
Lokoru Albert	Tepeth County	Moroto	NRM
Atyang Stella	District Woman Representative	Moroto	NRM
Achia Remigio	Pian County	Nabilatuk	NRM
Awas Sylvia Vicky	District Woman Representative	Nabilatuk	NRM
Aleper Moses	Chekwi County (Kadam)	Nakapiripirit	NRM
Lokeris Teko Peter	Chekwi East County	Nakapiripirit	NRM
Anyakun Esther Davinia	District Woman Representative	Nakapiripirit	NRM
Lochap Peterkhen	Bokora East County	Napak	NRM
Ngoya John Bosco	Bokora County	Napak	NRM
Nakut Faith Loru	District Woman Representative	Napak	NRM

Source: Based on data from Parliament of Uganda website.<sup>2</sup>

The table above shows that out of the 26 MPs from Karamoja, 25 are affiliated to the ruling NRM party and only one is independent but NRM-leaning. This illustrates that there is no competition between political parties in Karamoja. In the 2016 presidential elections, the NRM candidate (Yoweri

2 <https://www.parliament.go.ug/file/members-11th-parliament-2021-2026-pdf>

Museveni) garnered 97 per cent and 93 per cent in the Karamoja districts of Amudat and Napak respectively (Kiggundu 2016).

The ruling NRM regime has never allowed the people of Karamoja to freely elect leaders of their choice, particularly those belonging to other political parties or with divergent political opinions. This is different to what happens in other regions. The only MP from Karamoja who dared to vote against the NRM party's position during the age limit debates that allowed President Museveni to contest the 2021 elections was Adome Bildard Moses (Jie county 2016–2021) (*Independent* 2017). Later, this cost him re-election to parliament. He was fought by the centre of power during his tenure because they viewed him as a threat to their political dominance in Karamoja, so his campaign was nipped in the bud. Half of the MPs from other regions who voted for removing the presidential age limit that allowed President Museveni to run in the 2021 election were voted out, but in Karamoja it was the opposite (*Monitor* 2021a). There is a desire by the government not to have illegally armed pastoralists in Karamoja publicly demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the government. This is because the government of Uganda has deliberately allowed some pastoralists in Karamoja to keep guns (Akabwai and Ateyo 2007). Karamojong warriors have collaborated with the state army to fight certain insurgencies, such as the Lord's Resistance Army in Teso and some parts of Karamoja bordering Lango and Acholi (Abim) (Okoth 2021).

### *Resource allocation*

According to the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, resource allocations are based on well-founded allocation criteria. They include poverty headcount, where poor districts get greater allocations, and rural population and conflict, where more resources are allocated to conflict-prone areas. Development indicators such as education, life expectancy, access to sanitation and water, maternal and infant mortality rates, among others, show that Karamoja lags behind the rest of the country (Ayoo, Opio and Kakisa 2013). If the budget experts followed the allocation criteria, Karamoja would receive improved funding to develop capabilities like public goods (roads, electricity, schools) needed to reduce marginalisation.

Evidence from the field interviews indicates that: 'In most cases, government does not allocate adequate resources to the region as evidenced by poor roads network and lack of electricity in Karamoja although recently, electricity is being extended to some parts of Karamoja, yet other regions received it several decades back' (field interview with James Loporon, Mercy Corps, Kaabong district, 2020). Karamoja has a high economic potential in its minerals such as marble, gold, copper, cobalt and recently discovered oil. Kidepo National Game Park in Karamoja could boost tourism and local businesses if



the roads leading to it were tarmacked. Proceeds from minerals would generate adequate resources to develop capabilities in the region, but this is not happening, as pointed out by one senior NGO official:

I think resource allocation is really minimal compared to what the government fetches from Karamoja in terms of minerals. A large chunk of land has been gazetted for mining, but limited royalties and under-declaration of extractives such as marble are realised. But people who call themselves experts argue that Karamoja's population is low to attract huge funding from the government and a few number of vehicles on its roads cannot attract big investments in terms of tarmac. (Field interview with Samson Okwir, Resource Rights Africa, Moroto district, 2020)

Resources are allocated based on government priorities and the ability of top political representatives to lobby. Compared to other regions, Karamoja has no such influence at the centre, and its resource allocations are therefore limited.

The thinking of the officials involved in poverty and development programmes differs from that of the local community. The officials interviewed as part of this study prioritised a long-term infrastructural development approach of road construction and electricity alongside education and security. The local community members cared most about their immediate pastoral livelihood needs: water for both livestock and human use, health of the livestock and food security. 'We need a big dam like Kobebe for our animals' (Longoli Lotuman, Nakapelimoru community member).<sup>3</sup> As Leavy and Howard (2013) and Kabeer (2006) in their studies on people living in extreme poverty/marginalisation in 107 countries and inequality/social exclusion in the Asian context, respectively, posited that marginalised community members do not have a say (voice) in decision-making.

On whether resources allocated to Karamoja reach an ordinary person, it was found from the interviews that 'leakages occur on the way between the Local Government's intermediaries and procurement process and a bigger percentage of people [who] don't have the capacity to know how much has been allocated to them. So, if the allocated services reach, they are not in equal measure as they were released.' (Field interview with Joseph Ayen Ongom, Caritas Kotido and businessman in Abim, 2020) The most often mentioned reasons for resources failing to reach the intended beneficiaries were corruption, illiteracy and ignorance among community members. The community members lack key information pertaining to what is allocated, what they are entitled to and criteria for allocation, as Leavy and Howard (2013) asserted. This gives room for the elites to misappropriate public resources.

3 Kobebe is a big artificial water dam in Moroto district.

A case in point is the NUSAF3 scandal in Abim district in 2020. It led to the interdiction of Chief Administrative Officer Mr Ismael Ochengel from office for allegedly creating ghost projects, embezzlement of Covid-19 funds and sanctioning fraudulent deals with contractors (Ebele 2020). The eighteen Friesian cows that were meant for the identified peasant beneficiaries under Operation Wealth Creation were allegedly shared among some district politicians in Abim (Wanyana 2020).<sup>4</sup> In Moroto district, there was also corruption involving several government officials (Monitor 2019), and in Kotido district a water dam project was marred by corruption allegations (Ariong 2021).

Karamoja has always received the least amount of funding from the central government, because of the government's limited interest in developing the region. Resource allocation starts from the national budget committee, which is composed of selected MPs, cabinet ministers and other senior government officials. Budget committee members influence resource allocations in favour of their own constituencies. Essentially, Karamoja is dealt a poor hand since it has no influence at the budget allocation table and so receives what was left, and on top of that, it receives a meagre sum out of what was left.

### *Engagement of the local people*

Most participants interviewed reported that most people in Karamoja lack access to vital information concerning development and poverty alleviation programmes operated by the government. They cited high levels of illiteracy in Karamoja, lack of access to radios and televisions, hoarding of information by elites, a poor road network and a lack of access to phone and internet services as contributing factors. There were a few who said they got information from radio, NGOs (feedback sessions and toll-free calls) and (most often) by chance.

Communication is a big problem in Karamoja. Out of the nine districts, only four (Abim, Kotido, Moroto and Nakapiripirit) have access to FM radio networks. In cases where flyers, billboards are used, the information is written in English instead of pictorial illustrations for IEC (Information, Education and Communication) materials, despite the high illiteracy rate. When a few get information, they get it very late when other people in other parts of the country have moved on. A bigger portion of the region doesn't have mobile phone network coverage or internet and the few areas which have are very poor, spotted and unreliable. (Field interview with James Loporon, Mercy Corps, Kaabong district, 2020)

According to the data about ownership of ICT devices as reported by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS 2016), no individuals owned a television in Karamoja, while 42 per cent did in Kampala, 3 per cent in Kigezi, 2 per

4 Operation wealth creation is one of the national poverty alleviation programmes.

cent in Teso, Bukedi and Acholi and 1 per cent in West Nile. Karamoja reported 3 per cent individual ownership of computer/laptop against 13 per cent in Kampala. The community members of Nakapelimmoru mentioned that they get vital information pertaining to poverty eradication when they occasionally go to the trading centre or town. Most of the time, however, they stay in the villages to graze their animals and do some seasonal crop cultivation. 'If people knew about the existence of such information, they would have owned it, people look at survival in terms of what to eat and drink only. Radios are talking about development services, but people aren't asked what they want.' (field interview with Isaac Woyima, Abim district, 2020)

There is a very low level of meaningful engagement by the government with the poorest persons in the communities on poverty eradication and development programmes. The majority of community members were unaware of most government programmes, such as NUSAF and Operation Wealth Creation. People's right to information has been usurped by those implementing development programmes. The Karamojong live a miserable life amidst large-scale, lucrative projects, such as mineral exploitation in Moroto and other districts. The local people do not know how much mineral wealth is shipped from the region. The only people who know about it are the government and multinational mining companies. The majority of initiatives are hurriedly implemented without engaging the public. The reason for this is that some of the motives behind some initiatives target pastoral land, which the pastoralists detest. The statement below puts it better:

We condemn this in the strongest terms. We have learnt that 90 per cent of Karamoja land has been apportioned to investors even without the knowledge of the people and I know, for example, of an investor who has the entire sub-county of Rupa all in his hands without considering the settlement, the infrastructure, the health centres, the education centres. Another sub-county of Namalu was also taken. This is not fair. (The late Rev Fr Simon Lokodo, former Minister of State for Ethics and MP from Karenga district, quoted in *Monitor* 2021b)

The hoarding of information by central government and elites, the remote setting of Karamoja and illiteracy hinder people from accessing information about poverty alleviation (Bird et al. 2002 as well as Leavy and Howard 2013 agree with this finding).

## Conclusion and recommendations

This article has shown that many factors explain the persistent poverty in Karamoja. It disagrees with the official narrative that climatic conditions and

pastoralism are the major causes of Karamoja's persistent poverty. Based on field interview data and secondary sources, the paper discussed resource allocation, representation and engagement of local people as key issues to examine to uncover the causes of Karamoja's marginalisation, which has led to persistent poverty.

First, the Karamojong are not appointed in top government positions such as cabinet minister or permanent secretary. The continuous appointment of non-Karamojong to the Ministry of Karamoja Affairs is a prime example. The non-Karamojong do not understand the complex interests of the pastoralists and, therefore, do not bother to listen to the actual needs of the people. Since those appointed leaders are elected, they must attend to the needs of their constituents. As they seek to extend their terms in office, they use their offices to influence development in their constituencies. Karamoja is left out as a result. Poor political representation from local leaders in Karamoja facilitates the anti-pastoralist policy of the central government. There is no opposition from Karamoja MPs to the biased policy toward the region. After being elected, local leaders tend to focus on wealth building and strategically positioning themselves to be favoured by the state rather than being repressed for expressing concerns about marginalisation. While they are absent, other patriotic MPs from other regions take the government to task for neglecting Karamoja.

Second, inadequate funds allocated to Karamoja are mismanaged and embezzled. Moreover, the scarce resources are allocated to non-priority areas such as crop cultivation, despite Karamoja's semi-arid climate, instead of strengthening resilient pastoralism as the livelihood of the people. These resources are highly corrupted by the centre and the elites at the district level and do not reach the intended beneficiaries. As a result of illiteracy, many communities do not know what funds have been allocated to them and how to report embezzlement by government officials. Due to its lack of representation at resource allocation tables, Karamoja receives left-over resources that cannot drive its development.

Third, the local people lack knowledge of poverty alleviation and development programmes, due to the high illiteracy rate, lack of adequate radios and lack of access to television and the internet. The privileged elites and government leaders hoard crucial information in order to manipulate the public for their own benefit. There is a low level of meaningful engagement of the public by the government on development initiatives. Community members showed little awareness of poverty alleviation programmes. Such ignorance, for example, has led to mineral wealth being shipped out of Karamoja without the public knowing the quantity of minerals extracted and revenues fetched by the government.

Karamoja's persistent poverty has more to do with the political marginalisation it endures. Climatic conditions and pastoralism cannot be used to

mask deliberate and systemic government processes that have marginalised Karamoja for decades.

This paper recommends the following: political leaders and elites from Karamoja should put aside their differences and personal interests, and unite to speak with one voice about the continuous marginalisation from central government. Strengthen affirmative action such as appointing Karamojong to top state offices to enable the invisible local people to participate in decision-making. Engage the local people through timely and wider sensitisation about the existence of poverty alleviation and development programmes. Fight corruption. Terminate employment contracts and prosecute corrupt public officials. Strengthen advocacy and extend funding to the CBOs or local NGOs implementing pastoralism-related programmes. Empower communities to demand accountability from their leaders during public meetings (*barazas*). Make the local people aware of the need to embrace education as a key step towards fighting ignorance and illiteracy.

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