



Policy Brief

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WATER IS MILK: exploring the nexus between climate change, access to water and food security in Karamoja

Karamoja region of northeastern Uganda is home to a number of pastoralist and agro-pastoralist peoples relying traditionally on mobile livestock production and small-scale agriculture for their livelihoods. Karamoja also holds about 20% of Uganda's cattle population, 16% of goat, 50% of sheep, and 90% of the donkey population, as well as all camels present in Uganda (UBOS: The Uganda Livestock and Animal Census 2008). Given the harsh climatic conditions prevailing in Karamoja, the region's pastoralists depend on high levels of herd mobility and extensive use of rangelands so as to tackle temporal and spatial variations in resource availability. Continuous access to water is a particularly critical challenge in this context not only to allow for sustainable livestock production, but also for human survival.

When KDF first visited Nabokor water dam constructed by government about 40 kilometers north of Moroto town, we were amazed at how and why livestock in such numbers had gathered at the site. According to Lokorikebe, the leader of Moruadakai kraal *"this water is our life."*

Elder Aluk from the same kraal also said *"this water is milk. Our cows cannot give enough milk now because of drought. You cannot even get enough blood from these cows. The cows have also dried up. We need water for both animals and humans."*

Water is used for domestic purposes as well as for watering livestock. Water is mostly fetched from boreholes, constructed dams, swamps and rivers. Livestock however need more water than humans. Considering that Karamoja is a predominantly pastoralist society, a large part of the human population



Picture 1: Cows drinking water in Nabokor Dam, North of Moroto town.

lives far away from usually planned water facilities, negatively affecting people's access to water for domestic purposes. As a consequence, both humans and livestock often have to make do without water. This situation is further exacerbated by the low number of water facilities such as boreholes and dams which are moreover prone to drying up unexpectedly as a result of competitive usage and long drought conditions. In north Karamoja, this becomes worse when drought hits Turkana region in Western Kenya leading to migration of pastoralists from Loima and Kakuma to Uganda and consequently triggering conflicts over access to water in the affected areas.

WATER POLITICS

Both government and development partners are well aware of water related challenges in Karamoja, but provision of adequate water facilities has not been realized. For decades, the government of Uganda has sought for ways to provide reliable water sources to the Karamojong population through promotion of rain water harvesting technologies though at small, household levels and in some big government projects, water for productive assets.

The Karamoja Productive Assets Program (KPAP) 2010, initiated by World Food Programme (UN WFP), Food and Agriculture Organization (UN FAO) and the Government of Uganda, aimed at providing productive safety nets to food insecure pastoralists and agro-pastoralists in drought-

affected areas of Karamoja, thus supporting them in progressively graduating from relief aid towards increased self-reliance. Key in this program was providing water for irrigation and livestock production through the construction of small earth dams.

However, a technical evaluation carried out in 2010 of 26 small earth dams constructed under KPAP indicated that very few were built with the necessary forethought, often lacking fundamental technical criteria essential for the proper functioning of the earth dams¹. Local knowledge of both catchment outflow and merging gullies on gentle sloping hillsides was not considered as a result of which dam reservoirs were not sufficiently filled with water. Unsurprisingly, the program failed to achieve the purpose underlying the earth dam construction and both the technical and financial resources committed were wasted. But technical issues aside, it remains to be understood how *ponds*² constructed with manual technologies, some of them were under a meter deep in a region that experiences high level evaporation of water could be undertaken and taken for 'assets'. Looked at differently, it could be said that the primary objective of the KPAP project was transfer of food and money rations other than the provision of water for livestock production.

The technical report recommends better ways of constructing small earth dams in

¹ Jack T Chow. Small Earth Dam Technical Assessment Report 2010

² The project called them 'dams'

Karamoja to avoid *wasting resources*. However to no avail, as the reality on the ground reveals. This inevitably raises the question of why development efforts in this regard have failed to yield the desired results.

Other development interventions aimed at improving food security in Karamoja like the Karamoja Livelihoods Program (KALIP), Karamoja Integrated Disarmament and Development Plan (KIDDP), Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF 1&2) and the recent Dry Lands Integrated Project (DRIP) in Karamoja have all tended towards providing unsustainable water solutions for livestock production.

Civil society organizations have implemented some government programs aimed at providing water for production at village, parish and sub county levels. However, attention has been focused more on irrigated agriculture, rather than livestock production. Considering that the harsh climatic conditions prevailing in Karamoja are not favorable for agriculture, this approach has not been sustainable.

Regardless of the fact that the majority of the Karamojong population relies on pastoralism for their livelihoods, only few organizations run water programs aimed to support livestock production through construction of boreholes and water troughs for livestock. Some notable exceptions include VSF Belgium and its partners who have supported water for livestock in Moroto and Kaabong and Cooperation and Development who have progressively provided support around the region sinking boreholes and troughs. There is a great need for more programs of this kind.

FAST FORWARD

Government and development partners need to acknowledge the context of Karamoja which renders mobile pastoralism the most suitable and reliable livelihood strategy.. This therefore will guide provision of water for livestock production taking into consideration human consumption. Some of the progressive interventions can be:

1. Expand and strategically construct more water dams in Karamoja region



Picture 2: Borehole constructed by an organization to provide water for domestic use used by livestock in Rupa, Moroto

for livestock production. The available water dams of Kobebe, Nakwakwa, Lolita, Kailong, Longoromit, Arechek, Kawomeri and the valley tanks are not sufficient to support livestock production in the region. To make matters worse, these dams frequently dry up, forcing herders to move for even longer distances. When pastoralists migrate, they leave behind vulnerable families and households that also depend on livestock products.

2. Rehabilitate existing boreholes and sink more boreholes in and around the grazing areas. *Why don't you sink a borehole here and there? We just need boreholes to support these dams. We can water our animals all through the night. Look, we drink that very water. Can you drink it, you will die?* A one Teko Chubule, a kraal leader from Kanamuget tells KDF during one community meeting in Nabokor dam.
3. Construct water dams and boreholes along the Turkana-Matheniko border

to support Turkana pastoralists. Apart from providing additional water for livestock production, this furthermore mitigates conflict potential

4. Continuously involve the communities in identifying viable locations for water facilities and managing the water facilities provided to them. The pastoralists must know how to manage water dams and provide mini repairs to boreholes. This builds capacity to own and properly utilize water facilities.

Karamoja Development Forum is a Karamojong research and advocacy Non Governmental Organization (NGO) on Land, Pastoralism and Governance. KDF has set up a Pastoralist Information Center in Moroto under the Open Society Institute of East Africa (OSIEA) funded project with the objective of improving information sharing amongst pastoralists to address food security issues in the region. Feedback to this Policy Brief is encouraged. Send to karamojadf@gmail.com

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Picture 3: Water dam constructed by government with tank to support water in Lokali, Nakapiririt District