


Innovations and adaptations in youth livelihoods in Karamoja, Uganda

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Key Messages

- Young people are adapting their livelihood strategies to take advantage of growing economic opportunities as well as to respond to the mostly household-level shocks that they experience.
- Adaptations include the crossing of traditional gendered divisions of labor by both men and women, both out of necessity and in recognition of opportunities.
- Young people are innovating through the use of technology, through an expansion into services and catering, in the transportation and sale of alcohol, and through diversification within the livestock and cultivation sectors.
- Challenges to innovation and adaptation include gendered social norms and expectations, a lack of capital to start new activities, and the absence of fees to reach education goals.

Introduction and overview

This briefing paper explores the ways in which youth use innovation and adaptation in their livelihood strategies in the Karamoja sub-region of Uganda. This is one of four briefing papers based on research on youth livelihoods conducted in 2019. The other three papers address youth interaction with savings mechanisms, youth responses to major life events, and market access and decision-making. These findings are part of the Apolou Activity. Apolou is made possible by the support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and is implemented by Mercy Corps and partners. The Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University

is the research and learning partner for Apolou. The mixed-methods research seeks to understand the ways in which market expansion, including increased commoditization and monetization, have (or have not) provided opportunities for the population. The qualitative component of the research, of which this briefing paper is part, focuses specifically on youth and seeks to shed light on their experiences, aspirations, and interactions with economic, financial, and aid systems in a sub-region that has seen rapid change in the past decade. We seek to understand the ways in which young people (from late adolescence to late 20s) not only cope with shock and chronic vulnerability, but also take advantage of emerging opportunities.

The longitudinal approach entails interviewing the same cohort of individuals each year, which allows for an in-depth understanding of change over time. This design allows the research team to explore the engagement of young men and women in livelihood activities, decision-making, market interaction, governance, and financial strategies and systems, as well as their aspirations.

This paper examines the many ways in which youth are engaged in innovation as they seek to forge, adapt, and bolster their livelihoods. We discuss numerous innovations and adaptations as well as differences by gender, whenever possible. In

providing a snapshot into the lives and experiences of a select number of young men and women, these findings challenge some of the stereotypes about youth in Karamoja. For example, as opposed to young men who are idle after experiencing livestock loss, we see young men investing, diversifying, and intensifying their economic activities. Instead of young women relying heavily on brewing to support their families, we see young women using brewing in a limited fashion to gain capital to expand business in marketing, livestock, and the service sector. We see evidence of both males and females moving across traditional gender divides in order to support their families and invest in their futures.

Methodology

This briefing paper discusses some of the findings from the qualitative portion of the study. The first round of the cohort study in year two of the Apolou Activity occurred between October and December 2018, and the second round of the cohort study in the third year of the Apolou Activity occurred between October and December 2019. The research team worked across 24 villages receiving or scheduled to receive interventions under the programs of the Apolou Activity. In these villages, we purposively selected 48 female youth and 48 male youth (a total of 96 youth) with approximate ages from their late teens to mid-20s. We started with

focus group discussions to gather background and contextual information, and then proceeded with semi-structured, open-ended qualitative interviews with individual respondents. In year three of the Apolou Activity, the qualitative approach involved in-depth interactions with the same respondents interviewed the previous year. Of the 96 youth participants in 2018, the research team in 2019 was successful in locating and interviewing 86 youth (45 female and 41 male) between October and December 2019. We analyzed the data inductively, paying attention to patterns emerging from the research, and coded it in Dedoose.

Key findings

The discussion and conclusions of this paper are meant to improve stakeholders' understanding of youth economic engagement and innovation. With a better understanding of how youth are innovating, programming and policymaking can be tailored to take advantage of existing and emerging opportunities. The findings discussed here include i) adaptations in response to both shocks and opportunities; ii) innovation in response to shifting opportunities; iii) combining innovation with diversification; and iv) challenges to the success of youth livelihood strategies. Each of these subsections begins with main messages.

Adaptations in response to both shocks and opportunities

Main messages:

- Adaptations take place in response to both emerging opportunities and detrimental shocks.
- Most of the shocks with impacts on livelihoods that youth are experiencing are at the household (or idiosyncratic) level as opposed to being more widespread (or covariate).

- Livelihood diversification is the main means of coping with household-level shocks, and includes the crossing of gender-specific divisions of labor by both men and women.
- Taking on responsibilities and engaging in livelihoods normally performed by the other gender is not always net positive, and can increase time burdens and crowd out profits.

Livelihood adaptations are often understood in the context of response to shocks, and include strategies of intensification (increasing efforts in an existing activity), diversification (expanding into new activities), and, in some cases, migration (all or part of a household moving to another location).¹ As discussed elsewhere, these patterns are observable in Karamoja. They include intensification of natural resource exploitation and sale (including sale of firewood, production of charcoal, brick-making, artisanal mining), diversification into town-based activities (manual labor, brewing, domestic work), and migration by individuals or entire households (to towns within Karamoja or urban centers outside the region).² Male and female youth are also migrating seasonally to green belt areas to take advantage of better conditions for cultivation.

The majority of interviews with the youth cohort in late 2019 revealed few widespread (or covariate, as in affecting all participants under study) shocks. It was a good harvest season, markets were accessible, and security remained strong in most locations. Shocks that were reported were largely at the household level (also known as idiosyncratic shocks) and included death of a family member, loss of animals due to disease or theft, or loss of crops due to pests. Exceptions were in parts of Kaabong District, where livestock raids (allegedly by Turkana) were increasing and impacting broader swathes of the community. This briefing paper intentionally considers adaptations in response to both positive

changes, such as emerging economic opportunities, and negative stimuli, such as a loss of assets. Overall, we find that the ability of many of the youth in our sample to innovate and adapt allows them flexibility to respond to a variety of circumstances. We start with a discussion of some of the broad patterns that are visible in response to shocks. We then move on to discuss specific innovations among the population of study.

Diversification of livelihoods was the primary means of coping with shocks at the household level. This was visible in both short- and long-term responses to shock, and included **examples of shifting roles and responsibility by gender at the household level**. By typically male or typically female roles, we are not suggesting that there is anything *inherently* gendered about particular responsibilities or that these roles *ought* to remain associated with a particular gender. Rather, we are tracking the ways in which these responsibilities have been performed in gendered ways in this region over time, and, concurrently, the ways in which shocks interrupt and reshuffle these gendered patterns. This briefing paper provides numerous examples of innovations by women who are moving into roles that are more typically male-dominated in this context, such as livestock investment and sale of a variety of animal types. Although fewer in number, examples of male youth taking on roles typically performed by female youth also exist in the data. We hypothesize that these shifts may be initiated, at least in part, by a response to shock at the household level, such as deaths or departures of close relatives. Regardless of the motivation, men may be stepping into functions typically performed by women out of necessity, to take advantage of an economic opportunity, or to work in partnership for the advancement of household needs. In an example of stepping into these roles out of necessity, a 26-year-old man in Tapac Sub-County in Moroto District described that his wife had left him and moved to Kenya with

1 S. Davies, 1996, *Adaptable livelihoods*, London: Palgrave Macmillan UK; F. Ellis, 2000, *Rural livelihoods and diversity in developing countries*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; C. Barrett, T. Reardon, and P. Webb, 2001, Nonfarm income diversification and household livelihood strategies in rural Africa: concepts, dynamics and policy implications, *Food Policy* 26(4): 315-331.

2 E. Stites, 2020, "The only place to do this is in town:" experiences of rural-urban migration in northern Karamoja, Uganda, *Nomadic Peoples* 24(1): 32-55; E. Stites et al., 2007, Out-migration, return, and resettlement in Karamoja, Uganda: the case of Kobulin, Bokora County, Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, Boston; S. Ayoo, R. Opio, and O. Kakisa, 2012, Karamoja situational analysis: Northern Uganda Women's Empowerment Program, CARE International.

another man. He retained custody of the children, and described his engagement in typically female responsibilities:

I perform very many roles...now since I don't have my wife. I do garden work, fetch water, bathe children, care for my children, and provide food for our family, and also I clean the home where we stay. I find this hard for me because, as a young man, it's challenging for me to always provide enough food for my family. Right now I don't have enough time to socialize with my friends and also go with them for cultural dances that are not within the community.

He viewed this shift in gender roles and responsibilities as a temporary and unfortunate turn of events, and hoped to remarry as soon as possible to a woman who would "take care of both her children and the ones I had with the other wife of mine." While this respondent was taking on responsibilities typically held by women out of necessity, other men in the study reported engaging in longer-term shifts into traditionally female roles as a means to capitalize on economic opportunities. For example, a 20-year-old man in Lodiko Sub-County in Kaabong District suffered major setbacks in 2015, when his father died and his household lost 200 heads of livestock to raids. Armed relatives of his father helped themselves to the remaining animals after his father's death. In the intervening years, the respondent had taken up gold mining, farming, and firewood sales. He reported that harvest and sale of firewood—an activity normally performed almost exclusively by women—was his main source of income, earning him between 13,000 and 20,000 Ugandan shillings (UGX) (about US\$3.50 to US\$5.35) per week. Some females also pointed to male shifts into the traditionally female sphere. For example, a young woman in Nadunget Sub-County in Moroto reported a livelihood setback in the past year, when she lost most of her chickens to cholera. She was able to get by largely through the support of her husband, who was exceptional in his sharing of domestic duties:

He also does most of the work while at home such as farming, fetching firewood, taking care

of the children and also cooks...I really feel proud to have him because not all men in this village do what he does.

Several male respondents specifically discussed moving into poultry production as a livelihood activity, an activity normally done almost exclusively by women. A 17-year-old male in Karita Sub-County, Amudat District sold a mobile phone and used the proceeds to buy a chicken. A 27-year-old also in Karita discussed his chicken flock, which was "26 in number. The family eats them and they produce eggs for the children to eat. I recently bartered 8 big chickens for one breeding goat."

Importantly, while men's shift into activities typically performed by women may signify a more open-minded outlook, it may also indicate potential for monopolization of economic activities to the exclusion of women. Ongoing work by Feinstein colleagues in Darfur, Sudan illustrates that men often move into traditionally female-dominated sectors, such as dry-season cultivation, when these opportunities demonstrate profitability.³ While women are still expected to provide labor, the men often take control of the management of the activities and the proceeds arising from them. For instance, some male youth are serving as middlemen in poultry sales, buying chickens directly from women and then reselling them at the market for a profit. Young men are also reportedly moving into the resale of local brew in the planting season, when demand is high. Additional investigation and observation will be required in Karamoja to understand the extent to which this is occurring in this context, as such trends potentially have programmatic, economic, and social implications. Livelihood programs need to understand current gender balances in activities and control of proceeds while also monitoring how this balance may shift over time. Further research could explore the intersection between economic diversification and intra-household roles and whether shifts in gendered livelihoods are advancing or further undermining gender equality. In addition, investigation into changing concepts around masculinity and

3 This is a preliminary finding from the Taadoud project in Darfur, led by Catholic Relief Services. Thanks to Feinstein colleague Merry Fitzpatrick for sharing this result. See <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/taadoud-transition-to-development-project-sharp/>.

femininity—including cultural notions of the “ideal” man or woman—may also shed light on how best to design and target interventions.

Innovation in response to shifting opportunities

Main messages:

- Young people are taking advantage of both existing and new technologies to expand their livelihood strategies, including entering the mobile phone business.
- The growth of towns has provided new opportunities in services and catering. These opportunities largely fall along gendered lines, with women preparing and providing food and men more likely to be working in the security sector.
- Brewing and transportation of traditional brew and hard liquor remain important economic activities, with innovations occurring in by whom and how this work is being done.

Youth are engaging with both old and new **technologies** to expand their livelihoods. By “old technologies” we are referring to existing agricultural practices, and by “new technologies” we are referring to mobile phones and motorbikes. Taking advantage of the growing demand in the region, a young man in Karita in Amudat buys used mobile phones and then resells them for a profit. Putting long-standing technologies to profitable use, a man in Katabok Sub-County, Kaabong District decided that there was profit to be made in honey production. He built 16 beehives over the past year, 10 of which became occupied by bees. He expected to make between 200,000 and 500,000 UGX (about US\$53 to US\$134) from the sale of honey from these hives. This same young man drives a motorcycle taxi (*boda boda*) and purchased a mobile phone to help him communicate with potential customers. In another example of using older technologies, farmers are watering vegetables by hand in Kotido District and then taking the vegetables to Kotido town to meet the growing urban demand.

Youth are responding to the growing markets and increased commodification in Karamoja with an expansion into **services and catering**. A young woman in Tapac Town Council in Moroto learned how to bake bread in her village savings and loan association (VSLA), and now regularly sells bread to school students and in the weekly market. A woman in Nadunget in Moroto recognized that there was stiff competition among brewers of local brew (*kwete*), and began selling cooked beans and maize at the local market instead. She sells the food at the markets for 200 UGX (US\$0.05) per scoop. An 18-year-old female in Rengen Sub-County in Kotido also sells boiled maize and beans. The young father with the chicken flock mentioned above is now running a health clinic. He explained, “I got this experience after working for two years in a clinic in Chepereria in Kenya.” He had the capital to start the business by selling charcoal to lorry traders and maize from his garden. An 18-year-old male from Kaabong West Sub-County had been unable to afford secondary school but managed to get a position as a security guard in Tororo. He now sends remittances home on a regular basis to support his family and uses mobile money. He still aspires to go to secondary school and eventually become a teacher, but will have to fund it himself because his father is reluctant to pay for education. Also in the service sector, an 18-year-old in Tapac “wanted to start up a business of brewing but harvest was not really good this year due to the delayed rains.” Instead she “successfully started a *chapatti* business with capital of 20,000 shillings [US\$5.35], which I borrowed from my father, promising to pay back. The business was really doing great...but [then] thieves broke into my *chapatti* stall and stole everything.”

While a number of youth mentioned selling brew as an economic activity, there were some specific examples of **innovation related to brewing and booking** (transporting and selling alcohol). A young woman in Tapac, mentioned above as baking bread, brews *kwete* most mornings, invests the capital from the sales of brew into her bread business, and bakes in the afternoon. She explained that this system allows her to have the capital she needs and also to have a fallback option when sales of bread are low, such as when school is not in session and her regular customers—students—are not purchasing. An

18-year-old woman in Rengen, Kotido sold two goats to get adequate start-up capital to buy unpackaged hard alcohol (*waragi*) and to package and resell it for a profit. A 19-year-old woman in Nadunget, Moroto buys local brew in town and then resells it to customers in her village, making a profit of 2,000 UGX (US\$0.53) per jerry can. While not discounting the numerous downsides of booking and brewing, the importance of this form of commerce, especially for women, cannot be overlooked.⁴

There are several potential ramifications emerging from these shifts in livelihood patterns. First, humanitarian programmers should recognize that youth are innovating when it comes to their livelihoods. As a result, capacity-building, training, and information around livelihoods should not be limited to past livelihoods practices, and should include an exchange of stories of innovation across communities to share ideas and potentially stimulate new ventures. Second, humanitarian programmers should acknowledge that, even within traditionally pastoralist, agro-pastoralist, or agricultural livelihood specializations, technology plays an increasing role, either in facilitating existing livelihoods or in helping people connect to new opportunities. As such, the support that people may need to start up or continue livelihood activities may be different than what they received or needed in the past. For example, respondents reported using phones to communicate about livestock and to store money, or to earn money from charging the phones, both of which may rely on solar charging.⁵ Based on observations, the electronics sector in Karamoja's towns is rapidly expanding, and shops for mobile phones, phone charging, mobile accessories, airtime, and mobile money abound and are largely staffed by youth. Finally, although innovation is by and large a positive development, innovation does carry risk and/or can exacerbate existing risks in the community. This does not mean people should be discouraged from pursuing innovations, but programmers should continue to monitor the impact of these new livelihoods, with an eye to gendered risks and

benefits and the potential for risk to be spread and experienced unevenly.

Combining innovation with diversification

Main messages:

- Despite livestock losses and inequality in ownership, individual male and female youth are engaging in the livestock sector. This engagement includes purchase and resale at different markets, fattening, and gradual investments to grow herds.
- Many young people are optimistic about cultivation, and are expanding their acreage, diversifying into new crops, forming farming and marketing groups with other young people, and taking advantage of international markets, including Kenya and South Sudan.

Although many households have lost animals, others are continuing to **expand into or diversify within the livestock sector**. This expansion and diversification includes men and an increasing number of women, including a 19-year-old woman in Tapac who engages in animal sales and an 18-year-old woman in Nadunget who raises and then sells animals. A woman in Amudat Sub-County shows financial dexterity through comparing market prices: "At times I go to Amudat market to check on the prices of goats; when the prices are low I go and buy them, then sell them at a higher price in Loro market." A young man in Tapac also took advantage of the higher prices at Loro market, which he attributed to the presence of Kenyan buyers. He buys cattle at Nadunget market in Moroto and resells them in Loro. A male respondent in Karenga Sub-County in Kaabong District travels to South Sudan to buy bulls, sometimes with cash and other times by bartering crops, and then sells them at Lira Amach for a profit.

4 P. Iyer et al., 2018, The silent gun: changes in alcohol production, sale, and consumption in post-disarmament Karamoja, Uganda, Karamoja Resilience Support Unit, USAID/Uganda, UK Aid, and Irish Aid, Kampala; T. Atim, B. Athieno, K. Howe, R. Krystalli, and E. Stites, 2019, "Young people are the fulcrum of the community:" youth experience and aspiration in four districts of Karamoja, Uganda, Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, Boston.

5 S. Collings, 2011, Phone charging micro-businesses in Tanzania and Uganda, GVEP International.

Several other male respondents made profits by watching market prices change over the course of a day. For example, a young man in Amudat Sub-County buys goats early in the day in Amudat and then sells them for a higher price to outside traders. A young man in Kacheri Sub-County in Kotido pursues the same strategy with both goats and sheep at the main Kotido market. A man in Lotim Sub-County in Kaabong buys chickens and goats early in the day and resells them the same day to outside traders. To note, these strategies imply a greater resource of time, a potential advantage for male respondents over female respondents, whose responsibilities may not allow them to use the day for speculating on price fluctuations. Others engaged in livestock marketing include a young man in the same parish in Lotim, who buys goats from people within his village for 70,000 UGX (about US\$18.75) and then resells them at the market for 80,000 UGX (about US\$21.42). He is hoping to save enough money to buy a cow. A young man in Rengen Sub-County in Kotido District adds value by fattening purchased goats before reselling them for a profit. He used a loan from his VSLA to get himself going in this regard.

A number of young people described their **expansion into or intensification of agricultural activities.**

Data collection took place shortly after the 2019 harvest, which was a moderate one in most areas of data collection.⁶ Many respondents were optimistic about the potential for cultivation, in part because they had seen friends and relatives having successes with certain crops and in certain areas. Some people had already expanded the amount of land they were cultivating, while others had plans to do so before the next planting season. A 17-year-old woman in Lobalangit Sub-County in Kaabong had received five acres of land from her mother. She planned to sell some of her harvest and still have plenty for home consumption. A young woman in Rengen, Kotido had also expanded her acreage, primarily into sorghum. In the same parish, a different young woman emphasized the role of cultivation in her livelihood strategy:

The livelihood activity that sustains the family most is my cultivation...I enjoy it because I know

that I am producing my own food unlike *leja leja* [casual day labor] where I am working for someone. Last year I cultivated sorghum but this year I added finger millet and maize because the rains were enough and promising...Even though this year's sorghum harvest is much [ample], I do not want to sell any because the hunger that hit the family last year was terrible. I will just store that sorghum for home consumption.

A woman in Nadunget, Moroto planned to expand her gardens in time for the next growing season. She expected to have one garden just for sorghum and the other for maize and beans, and to build a hut for overnight stays at the more distant plot. A young man from Amudat Sub-County planned to increase maize production and to retain the surplus for sale to the Kenyan market. He also had 20 beehives and planned to use the proceeds from the sale of honey to purchase maize to add to his supplies. The profits from these efforts went to support his trade in goats and sheep.

Several male respondents discussed working in farm groups. A 22-year-old man in Karenga Sub-County, Kaabong is in a rotating farm group of 22 youth—10 young men and 12 young women. They share out their profits at the end of the season. He plans to invest in goats to use for a bridewealth payment. Another young man in Karenga in Kaabong has been in a farming group since 2017. They plant sorghum and maize, and he takes the produce to South Sudan where he sells it for a higher price. Several young people had diversified into cash crops. This included a 25-year-old woman in Amudat Sub-County, whose main source of income is from the sale of aloe vera. A young man in Lobalangit in Kaabong expanded his gardens over the past year with a VSLA loan and planted cotton. He hired a number of people to help with the labor and expects to make more than 660,000 UGX (about US\$177) per garden. He plans to use the profits to purchase bulls to aid in the cultivation; he has been borrowing bulls since two of his household's animals died. Two respondents highlighted the profitability of vegetable sales based on demand from towns. A 19-year-old female in Nadunget, Moroto expanded her crops

6 FAO GIEWS, January 16, 2020, Country briefs: Uganda. <http://www.fao.org/giews/countrybrief/country.jsp?code=UGA>; FEWS NET, October 14, 2019, East Africa: Seasonal Monitor, October to December rains forecast to be fully established by late October in eastern Horn. <https://fews.net/east-africa/seasonal-monitor/october-14-2019>.

to include onions, tomatoes, and eggplants, which she tries to sell in town. A young man in Katikékile Sub-County, Moroto was trying to save money for seeds and wants to cultivate more land. He plans to join a group farming vegetables and then sell them in Moroto town. Lastly, a young man in Karenga, Kaabong recognized the profits to be made from cereal banking, especially in regards to cross-border markets: “I also do cereal banking where I sell to traders within the community. I save the money I get from cereal banking in the VSLA and the rest I use for buying food for the family and for paying school fees of my brothers.”

Challenges to the success of youth livelihood strategies

Main messages:

- Gender-specific challenges continue to hamper the advance of young people. Females face systemic structural hurdles as well as daily struggles in completing the expected domestic and reproductive duties. Young men struggle with the loss of livestock-based livelihoods and an inability to adequately provide for or protect their families.
- A second major challenge faced by young people is a lack of capital to start businesses or make investments. This includes credit, land, and basic supplies. VSLAs partially fill this gap, but not all youth are participating in these schemes.
- A third obstacle is the inability to fulfill education goals due to lack of fees for secondary or tertiary education.

Despite many improvements to physical and economic security in recent years, Karamoja remains a difficult place to survive, let alone prosper. Not

surprisingly, youth respondents in the qualitative cohort discussed a broad range of challenges, extending from harsh climatic conditions to limited job opportunities. For the purpose of this briefing paper, we take as givens the existence of certain underlying factors that pose challenges to daily livelihoods, including an erratic climate, extremely high unemployment, endemic poverty, and the historical political, social, and economic marginalization of the sub-region.⁷ Hence, the specific issues discussed in this section should be considered as existing *in addition* to these broad structural challenges. Those highlighted here were raised repeatedly by youth when discussing their current and future aspirations.

The first set of specific challenges are those that are **gender specific**. These are most pronounced for young women, who detail livelihood challenges ranging from domestic time burdens to lack of adequate human capital to gender-based violence and sexual assault. As a 19-year-old woman in Tapac, Moroto explained, “I struggle to farm alone. My husband most times goes to take the animals for grazing and he comes during harvest when most of the work is done, which is overwhelming. It is even worst this year now I have the child with me.” An 18-year-old in Nadunget, Moroto discussed how hard it is to farm with a child who cries all the time and explained that she doesn’t feel ready to be a mother at all, let alone a good mother. Also in Nadunget, a 21-year-old described the heavy time burden faced by women and the widespread problems of domestic violence and widow inheritance. She discussed the difficulties of being forced to marry a deceased husband’s brother without consideration or consultation. An 18-year-old girl in Rengen Sub-County, Kotido described the patterns of early and forced marriage that young girls often face, as well as rape and defilement. Numerous young women across the population described the problem of inadequate sanitary supplies to deal with their monthly menses and the challenges this posed

7 K. Bushby and E. Stites, 2015, Resilience and risk in pastoral areas: recent trends in diversified and alternative livelihoods. Case study: Karamoja, Uganda, USAID/East Africa Resilience Learning Project, Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, Boston; E. Stites, K. Howe, T. Redda, and D. Akabwai, 2016, “A better balance;” revitalized pastoral livelihoods in Karamoja, Uganda, Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, Boston; J. Burns, G. Bekele, and D. Akabwai, 2013, Livelihood dynamics in Northern Karamoja: a participatory baseline study for the Growth, Health and Governance Program, Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, Boston.

for regular livelihood activities at these times. These respondents highlight consistent patterns of extremely high expectations and burdens placed upon women—including very young women—who are meant to care for numerous young children while also being the primary food providers for their families, often with little if any assistance or support and against a backdrop of pervasive violence against women.⁸ High dependency ratios combined with early marriage and lack of equitable distribution of labor across the genders create a profoundly difficult life for women in the study. As one 25-year-old woman put it, she felt “too old” to be doing so much farming without help.

Many of the parameters that affect the uptake of women’s livelihoods and overall wellbeing are due to structural factors that determine and influence the broader environment in which livelihoods take place. These include deep-seated patriarchal norms and customs, unequal inheritance and ownership systems, gendered discrepancies in education and literacy, early marriage and early childbearing, high fertility rates, and rampant domestic violence, to name just a few. While addressing structural obstacles can be challenging for development partners, there are programmatic means to address some of the manifestations of these issues. For example, programs could work to improve community-based childcare options for young mothers, to establish local manufacturers and suppliers of sanitary materials for menstruation, and to offer lines of start-up capital specifically for female entrepreneurs. Further research might examine the ways in which social networks are being reconfigured, along with the implications for gendered labor and livelihoods.

While the burdens on women may be more visible, young men also face gender-specific livelihood challenges. In the space of 15 years, young men in pastoral and agro-pastoral regions of Karamoja

have seen their primarily livelihood activity—caring for livestock—and their primary household role—protecting people and herds—erode.⁹ These changes have had profound impacts upon young men and, in some cases, may have contributed to the increase in low-level insecurity that plagued the sub-region in the years following the initial disarmament period.¹⁰ Conversations with male youth for this study surfaced fewer concerns about the loss of livestock-based livelihoods than expected, but they did highlight patterns of the relative voicelessness of male youth. A young man in Rengen in Kotido explained that young men are expected to do a lot of work but receive little appreciation from the elders and the community at large, and that they have few skills and little education relevant to the job market. In a focus group in Amudat, young men discussed the hardship of being in the kraals for an extended period of time. A young woman in Panyangara, Kotido explained that neither male nor female youth have official roles within community leadership, but are expected to play major roles nonetheless. For young men, this role is as protectors of both humans and assets.

A second cross-cutting and recurrent challenge raised by respondents was **lack of capital** to start businesses, invest in opportunities, or advance their lives. In describing the obstacles to their aspirations, several young men stated lack of capital.¹¹ A young man was unable to open a grocery store, and a young woman in Loroo Sub-County in Amudat said that a lack of capital had prevented her from opening a shop to sell secondhand clothes as she had planned. A young woman in Nadunget lacked funds to secure her own equipment and supplies to start brewing. A young man struggled to secure adequate land to farm, though this case was largely due to wrangles with his neighbor. While lack of capital is a problem for both genders, patriarchal systems of inheritance can compound the issue for females. A young man interviewed in Kacheri Sub-County, Kotido said,

8 E. Stites and K. Howe, 2019, From the border to the bedroom: changing conflict dynamics in Karamoja, Uganda, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 57(March, no. 1): 137-159.

9 E. Stites and D. Akabwai, 2010, “We are now reduced to women”: impacts of forced disarmament in Karamoja, Uganda, *Nomadic Peoples* 14(2): 24-43.

10 E. Stites and A. Marshak, 2016, Who are the *lonetia*? Findings from southern Karamoja, Uganda, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 54(May): 237-262.

11 For young men, the lack of cattle for bridewealth is a major obstacle to official marriage, as discussed in another paper in this series, “Life events and markers for young people in Karamoja, Uganda.”

“Girls particularly are not favored...when it comes to asset ownership, girls are not given anything to inherit and this has made them poor.”

A common response to lack of capital is to borrow from family members or VSLAs. Taking on debt can be precarious at the start of a business venture, as illustrated by the young woman who took a loan from her father to start a *chapatti* business and lost everything to theft. However, without access to credit, there are few if any options for youth seeking to start businesses, and it is most likely only those youth with good social connections and some existing profits who are participating in VSLAs and accessing loans (see briefing paper entitled “Youth experiences with and access to savings and credit in Karamoja, Uganda”).¹²

Access to capital can provide the resilience that emerging businesses need to survive shocks. As the bread-maker in Tapac explained, “I was able to overcome challenges because I had access to capital.” Despite setbacks, including defaulting on loans, youth remain remarkably resilient. The young woman who lost her *chapatti* business to theft outlined her next venture:

I would love to look for some capital and start up a small-scale business in the village where I will be purchasing items like soap, salt, sugar—among others—from the market in Moroto town and supply them at the village at a retail price. Hopefully this time I will join any savings group in my community, though I am not sure whether they do exist. Or I will start to save in a box in my house and keep good watch over it.

The third common challenge across respondents was a **lack of fees for education**, both secondary and tertiary. Inadequate fees was the main reason cited for stopping school earlier than desired. A number of young people described being unable to attend or complete secondary school. Respondents with professional career goals felt particularly overwhelmed when faced with the financial and

time burden of acquiring the required credentials to become a teacher, doctor, or priest. Some respondents described having support from their families, while others reported that their family members did not understand their aspirations and would not lend support. A young man from Katikekile in Moroto who wanted to be a priest said his father would not provide support for seminary studies, as he did not think it was a worthwhile endeavor. One woman in Lodiko Sub-County, Kaabong, explained, “My aspiration is to be a teacher and I wanted to join college, but my finances were not enough. My husband...discourages me from going back to school, because he feels that if I get higher education I will end up leaving him, since he stopped in [secondary school] and does not want me to feel superior to him.” This example illustrates a dual challenge faced by women, who must overcome both financial and cultural hurdles in order to succeed in their aspirations. However, regardless of the extent of family support, the financial burden stood as an obstacle for all. The case of a young man in Karenga, Kaabong highlighted a pattern often seen among young men, and in particular those who are elder siblings. Although he wished to continue with his education, he prioritized the schooling of his two younger sisters and paid for their school fees as opposed to his own when he did have money. Lastly, some respondents, such as an 18-year-old male youth in Kaabong West, pointed out that even those who did manage to finish higher education were often unable to find work.

12 Per the challenge identified that youth lack capital to start new livelihood activities and income-generating activities, Apolou is promoting financial inclusion by linking micro-finance institutions to Apolou participants.

Conclusions and implications

Key messages:

- Young people are optimistic, ambitious, hardworking, and innovative in seeking to improve their lives and livelihoods. They are engaging in new activities and programs and ideas needed to keep pace and are not relying purely on historical livelihood patterns and strategies.
- Both males and females faced gender-specific challenges and social obstacles. Diversification remains largely gender specific. Programs need to be inclusive but also tailored to the reality of these different needs.
- Males may at times move into a typically female-dominated sector when it becomes profitable or successful. Programmers need to monitor such developments, as they may affect efforts to economically empower women.
- Respondents were taking advantage of opportunities in cultivation in the wake of a good year. Given the climate variability in the region, cultivation remains risky in most areas and should not be promoted as a sole-source livelihood, but rather one component of a diversified strategy.

The young men and women in the study population demonstrate the resiliency and adaptability of youth to take advantage of new opportunities, take on risk in new endeavors, and adapt in the face of emerging shocks and pervasive hardships. These narratives depict an active and hard-working sub-set of the population and counter stereotypes of young people sitting idle, waiting for handouts, or engaging in self-destructive pastimes such as excessive alcohol consumption. Of particular note is the young age of many of the respondents. In the initial study design and creation of the cohort, the research team

intentionally included a spread of ages from the late teens to the mid-20s, with the idea that we might see some variations in perspectives and experiences across this age span. We expected that those at the lower end of this age range would have fewer responsibilities and take a less active role in their households. This assumption has proven to be far from correct. Although exceptions exist, the data overwhelmingly indicate the extent of responsibility for and involvement in household economic activities taken on by respondents in their late adolescence. While such patterns are not unique to Karamoja, it is worth reminding ourselves of the extent of maturity, energy, and optimism evident in many of the youth in this age group.

This reminder should also guide program design, emphasizing the need to communicate ideas, stimulate innovation, adopt and promote relevant technologies, and safeguard against potential pitfalls, over designing programs that rely solely on historic livelihoods and practices.¹³ These interviews highlighted the dynamic conceptions of masculinity and femininity, gender roles, and decision-making responsibilities that exist, which livelihood programs must better understand in order to design and deliver interventions. Further research and program monitoring should explore the nature and drivers of shifting gender roles and responsibilities, the impacts for individuals, households, and communities, and the implications for programs that aim to promote gender balance. A recognition of gender-specific challenges and opportunities that youth face can assist programmers and policy makers to identify entry points for supporting youth and their innovations. Apolou is working with financial institutions to improve women's access to digital financial services while also working with female (and male) beneficiaries to support basic literacy and numeracy in an effort to expand the use of technology, including cell phones and mobile banking. Programs should have inclusive interventions that cater to both male and female

¹³ The Apolou team facilitated an exchange of youth in February 2021, taking a number of young people from different locations to Yumbe District to witness how refugees there were employing technology in income-generating activities. Such exchanges and exposure to innovation is a way to help youth take on new ideas.

youth and include gender-sensitive approaches and activities.

On the whole, the patterns discussed in the data point to widespread opportunity and numerous possibilities for successful and, in some cases, sustainable livelihoods. However, there are some important qualifiers to keep in mind when thinking about how to translate this evidence into programs and policies. These include:

- Interviews in late 2019 took place after a particularly good harvest. However, we know that approximately one out of every three harvests in the Karamoja sub-region fails. Hence, relative prosperity, from the sale of produce, and optimism about cultivation should not be viewed as the norm, and programming should view such years as occasional benefits. Decades of ecological research illustrate that pastoral and agro-pastoral systems in East Africa should not be seen as stable, but rather understood as existing in a state of unpredictable and volatile climatic conditions, to which pastoral populations—when allowed to function as designed—are well adapted.¹⁴ This means that programs based on assumptions of stability—i.e., of crop production, rainfall, and access to resources—are bound to be unsuccessful.
- Related to the above, a number of respondents were discussing expansion into and innovations around agriculture, whether as a primary livelihood or as part of a diversified strategy. In addition to the context of a good harvest year, the location of such successes is also important to note. The Karamoja sub-region is vast and home to numerous microclimates and agro-ecological zones. Some of the respondents who reported recent successes in agricultural production were in locations where farming has historically proved more successful based on local soil and rainfall conditions or innovations, such as terracing of mountain slopes by the Tepeth to prevent run-off.
- Areas of diversification and intensification of livelihoods largely remain gender specific. Women are making food and beverages; men are doing trade and labor. It is important to be aware of these trends and to take into account the gendered expectations and burdens upon both women and men when designing programs.
- The above narrative also includes some examples of young people diversifying and intensifying activities, including crossing into sectors or activities traditionally performed by the other gender. While these trends may indicate an expansion of gendered spaces, it is also possible that men will exert control over profitable activities normally done by women, thereby limiting the financial benefits that accrue to women through these activities. Programmers therefore need to pay close attention to the possibility of women being crowded out by men when a given sector or activity reaches scale.

14 J. Ellis and D. Swift, 1988, Stability of African pastoral ecosystems: alternate paradigms and implications for development, *Journal of Range Management* 41(November, no. 6); I. Scoones, 2004, Climate change and the challenge of non-equilibrium thinking, *IDS Bulletin* 35.3: *Climate change and development*: 114-120; M. Bollig, 2016, Adaptive cycles in the savannah: pastoral specialization and diversification in northern Kenya, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10(1): 21-44.

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