



Comparative analysis of livelihood recovery in the post-conflict periods in Karamoja and northern Uganda

Mind the gap – briefing paper 2

Bridging the research,
practice and policy divide to
enhance livelihood resilience
in conflict settings

This is the second in a series of three briefing papers that form part of the Mind the gap – Bridging the research, practice and policy divide to enhance livelihood resilience in conflict settings project, a collaboration between the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University.

This briefing paper accompanies a report that examines the parallel but separate trajectories of peace-building, recovery and transformation over the past 15 years in northern (Acholi and Lango subregions) and northeastern (Karamoja) Uganda. Parallels between these areas include a history of marginalization from the central state, underdevelopment and endemic poverty and vulnerability to climate change and cross-border incursions.

We argue that the initial peace processes in both locations were largely top-down in nature, with little participation from the affected populations. While keeping in mind the key differences in these areas, we highlight the nature of recovery, the ongoing challenges and the need for external actors to be cognizant of the continuing fragility as they design policies and interventions for these locations.



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Key messages

- Northern Uganda and Karamoja have both experienced a rapid improvement in peace and security over the past 15 years. However, the peace processes were largely external and top-down, with little involvement of the local populations. In the case of Karamoja, the eventual addition of local initiatives may have gone a long way in creating the security that had been elusive in numerous other pacification efforts.
- Both regions have made major strides towards recovery following the end of the respective conflicts. In northern Uganda, this recovery has taken the form of displaced people returning to their rural homes and resuming cultivation. In Karamoja, improved security has brought widespread market growth and allowed both animal- and crop-based livelihoods to expand.
- Despite these gains, the regions face continuing, broadly similar challenges. These include stubbornly high rates of food insecurity and malnutrition in Karamoja and highly volatile food security in northern Uganda. These conditions call into question the idea of widespread improvements brought by the end of conflict.
- Additional shared challenges to recovery include the impacts of climate change, poor governance and corruption, limited opportunities for decent work, livelihood changes and conflict over land.
- Although the security improvements in both areas are pronounced, tensions still exist, and long-term stability is not a given. Peace is best described as tenuous.

The impacts of the conflict and the means of conflict resolution in both Karamoja and northern Uganda continue to be felt today.

Top-down peace processes, to various degrees

The Karamoja subregion experienced decades of insecurity due to cattle raiding and associated violence. An absence of rule of law exacerbated the situation and allowed commercial involvement in raiding and tit-for-tat violence to escalate (Stites and Howe, 2019). Lack of development, unfilled district positions and widespread corruption exacerbated existing vulnerabilities. Insecurity on the roads and in rural areas made the subregion a no-go area for traders, international organizations and government officials.

In 2006, the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) implemented the second disarmament campaign in Karamoja in five years. This initiative was top-down and heavy-handed. The early years of the campaign were beset with allegations of human rights violations (Human Rights Watch, 2007; Bevan, 2008; Stites and Akabwai, 2010). Coming as it did as part of a hundred years of similar efforts, many observers gave it little chance of success (Bevan, 2008). However, by 2013, large-scale cattle raids were infrequent and road ambushes were almost non-existent.

Critically, local initiatives eventually emerged in parallel to the top-down efforts. Local resolutions adopted in 2013–2014 created a system of compensation for thefts. This system was enforced by local “peace committees” consisting of civilian men working closely with security forces. Communities in most of the region (and some neighboring areas) adhere to these resolutions and recovery rates for stolen animals have improved. Male elders also reportedly refer to these resolutions to quell crime in their communities, thereby reinforcing customary conflict resolution mechanisms that were previously on the decline (Stites and Howe, 2019).

In northern Uganda, a top-down, politically negotiated peace process between the Lord's Resistance Army and the Government of Uganda ended two decades of fighting in 2006. The internally displaced person camps were disbanded. Thousands of displaced people returned to their rural homes, some because they had no other option once assistance in the camps ceased. Many people felt left out of the political reconciliation process and livelihood assistance and rehabilitation of services were not as far-reaching or effective as people had hoped. While the situation has continued to improve for many, the impacts of the conflict and its associated traumas have had a deep and lasting impact upon the population. The top-down nature of the peace has done little to address these wounds.

In both Karamoja and northern Uganda, the impacts of the conflict and the means of conflict resolution continue to be felt today. Upheaval continues over land rights and land access in both areas, with the state and private investors (sanctioned by the state) exacerbating the situation. The relationship between civilians and authorities, including security forces, also remains tenuous in both areas. For instance, in northern Uganda, the involvement of federal and local authorities in the lives of local civilians fluctuates widely, undermining the relationship between communities and authorities. In addition, the national inequities and prejudices that underpinned the decades of civil conflict have not been addressed, despite efforts at securing reparations and national reconciliation. In Karamoja, relations with the military have improved since the height of the disarmament operation, but soldiers – as opposed to police – continue to perform law-and-order functions in much of the region. This ongoing military presence contributes to the sense that while there is relative peace, it could easily unravel if the military's role was to change.

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The nature of recovery

One of the most important factors in recovery in Karamoja has been the growth of markets (Karamoja Resilience Support Unit, 2018; Mercy Corps, 2016; Rockeman *et al.*, 2016; Stites, Howe and Akabwai, 2017). Traders were reluctant to bring wares to the region during the period of insecurity and hence goods were few and prices high. Today, most trading centres host markets on a weekly basis and shops have consistent inventories. At the household level, however, most people engage with the market on an ad hoc basis and at the micro level, selling small amounts of surplus crops or livestock to cover cash needs or food purchases.

In northern Uganda, the biggest driver of recovery has been the return of displaced people to their homes and the resumption of farming. By 2011, crop production had resumed its pre-conflict status as the primary livelihood in the region (Lehrer, 2013). However, despite the fertile soil, numerous challenges hamper the growth of the agricultural sector (Mugonola and Baliddawa, 2014). These include low crop yields and limited information on prices and markets reaching farmers. In addition, farmers have difficulty accessing bank loans and the agricultural inputs they need are often unavailable or of poor quality. Illiteracy is high, with negative impacts on record keeping and on the business side of farming. Overall, despite the peace and widespread returns, economic growth in the region has not been as robust as hoped (Martin, Petty and Acidri, 2009; International Alert, 2013; Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, 2014; Mazurana *et al.*, 2014).

Northern Uganda and Karamoja continue to struggle with food insecurity and malnutrition.

Continuing challenges

Despite resumption of livelihoods, market development and large amounts of national and international funds, both northern Uganda and Karamoja continue to struggle with food insecurity and malnutrition. Longitudinal survey data over a six-year period from Acholi and Lango subregions show high variability in household food security. Only 10 percent of households maintained the same level of food security (worst, second worst, second best, best) from one year to the next (Marshak, 2019).

In addition, experiences of war crimes and crimes against humanity during the war had a significant impact on food security, even years after the end of the conflict. This impact included 55 percent of households in the Acholi subregion and 28 percent of households in the Lango subregion (Mazurana *et al.*, 2014).¹ Households with a member who had experienced such abuse had, on average, 5 percent higher food insecurity. Each additional war crime increased food insecurity by an average of 1 percent. Global acute malnutrition has also increased slightly in the Acholi and Lango subregions over the past decade, with only minimal improvements in Lango as compared to the height of the displacement crisis. As of 2018, rates of global acute malnutrition were 5 percent in Lango and 3.9 percent in Acholi (Buzigi, 2018).

Factors behind high global acute malnutrition rates likely include the loss of livestock among the poor, declining access to milk and shifts towards high-vulnerability agriculture.

Karamoja has seen a general increase in the prevalence of wasting, despite the cessation of conflict a decade ago. The overall prevalence of global acute malnutrition in the region was 13.8 percent in 2017, with the highest levels – above emergency thresholds – in Moroto and Kotido Districts at 18.5 percent (World Food Programme, 2017). Factors behind high global acute malnutrition rates likely include the loss of livestock among the poor, declining access to milk and shifts towards high-vulnerability agriculture (Sadler *et al.*, 2010; Stites and Mitchard, 2011). Other factors include inadequate infant feeding practices, overworked and malnourished mothers, poor breastfeeding practices, poor hygiene and sanitation, poor health of infants and children under age five and unstable access to food (Boucher-Castel, 2017).

¹ War crimes or crimes against humanity were committed by parties to the conflict. These crimes include destruction and/or looting of property; abduction; forced recruitment; forced disappearance; severe beating or torture; being deliberately set on fire or put in a building on fire; being a victim of and surviving a massacre; being attacked with a hoe, panga or axe; sexual abuse; returning with a child born due to rape; being forced to kill or seriously injure another person; being seriously wounded by a deliberate or indiscriminate attack; and suffering emotional distress that inhibits functionality due to experiencing or witnessing the above.

This inelasticity of food security and nutrition in two regions that have seen marked improvements in security and high levels of international and national investment calls into question many assumptions about recovery and development. In particular, the idea that peace will bring a natural bounce in economic and household well-being does not appear to hold up in these cases.

Northern and northeastern Uganda have additional structural challenges to recovery in common. These include climate change and environmental degradation, poor governance and corruption, limited opportunities for decent work, livelihood transformation and loss and conflict over land. These factors reinforce each other and make it extremely difficult for average households to develop sustainable and secure livelihoods.

A tenuous peace

We cannot understate the positive impacts of improved security over the past 13 years in northern and northeastern Uganda. People go about their daily lives without constant fear; markets are operating; road travel is possible. In both locations, however, the peace is somewhat tenuous.

The possibility of resumed conflict is most pronounced in Karamoja and people speak of a “relative peace” (Howe *et al.*, 2015). The continuing presence of large numbers of UPDF soldiers helps maintain the status quo. While rumors point to hidden caches of weapons, it is unlikely that people will actively rearm while the soldiers remain (Hickey *et al.*, 2016). However, the disarmament campaign addressed the symptom of the insecurity – that is, the weapons – without effectively addressing the underlying destabilizing factors, including poverty, marginalization, tension over resources, erosion of livelihoods, instability and armed incursions spilling across national borders and inadequate policy or programmatic support for the region. Economic growth is bringing gradual change in Karamoja, but it is unclear if this change will affect a broad-enough portion of the population – young and old, urban and rural, herder and farmer – to meet the needs and aspirations of the population.

Peace in northern Uganda is more secure than in Karamoja due to the departure of the Lord’s Resistance Army from the region. As in Karamoja, however, many structural issues behind the conflict have not been resolved, including the north’s deeply entrenched economic and political marginalization from the wealthier southern part of the country. This inequity continues to influence geopolitics: Uganda depends heavily on foreign assistance and low levels of development in the north and northeast provide justification for continued solicitation of aid from donors. This reliance on aid further weakens the government’s incentives to develop effective governance to deliver services in these areas.

Diversification at the household level in both regions is key to livelihood sustainability and resilience.

Conclusions and implications

Although relative peace has taken hold over the past decade, broader change is slow to come to northern Uganda and Karamoja. Donors have invested millions of dollars in interventions with what at times appears to be few visible results, especially in Karamoja. This is due, in part, to the extent of the issues, limited local capacity, low skill levels and high illiteracy. Endemic corruption and complacency born out of decades of reliance on outside assistance also play a role. In addition, some interventions may align with government as opposed to local priorities and may meet tacit resistance at the local level. Behavior change activities miss cultural norms and practices that may inhibit programme uptake.

Many interventions are rural and place-based, such as agricultural extension trainings. Research shows, however, that much of the population and especially the youth are moving to urban areas or are in motion between urban and rural locales. They are in search of better work, social freedoms, investment opportunities and improvements in the lives of their children. Although remittances are often presumed to flow from urban to rural locations, data from both northern Uganda and Karamoja indicate that the exchange occurs in both directions. Most place-based interventions fail to take into account this dynamic and the fluidity between these economic, social and locational spheres.

Many interventions do not consider the changing nature of these areas. In Karamoja, for instance, farming programmes need to be aware of the fragility of cultivation as a livelihood strategy and to encourage farmers to diversify, including into small ruminants and poultry. At the same time, the data from this and other pastoral regions indicate that small-scale herders are particularly vulnerable to loss of livestock and associated destitution. Market expansion may do little to stop – and may even expedite – this trend, as struggling pastoralists engage in distress sales. In northern Uganda, young people are looking to urban centres for new opportunities and ways of life, but the dearth of support, skills and services in these areas contributes to a precarious existence.

Diversification at the household level in both regions is key to livelihood sustainability and resilience. Interventions often seek to support or promote diversification with skills training or micro-loans for small businesses. However, data from both these geographic areas illustrate that diversifying can come with costs. In northern Uganda, for instance, the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium data show that people with more diverse livelihoods are more likely to pull children from school – possibly to engage in these activities or to help with domestic tasks.

In Karamoja, large numbers of people have shifted into agriculture. For many, this shift was an attempt to diversify away from livestock. However, a number of these farmers now fall into the group of the very poor who do not have animals to fall back upon when crops fail. Programmes such as the introduction of improved seeds may help people make a shift into more balanced or improved crop production, but such interventions to date have not been sustainable without subsidization from outside actors.

The recent trajectories of recovery in Karamoja and northern Uganda are remarkably similar, even while the context, livelihoods and challenges in each location are importantly unique. National actors should not seek to derive combined approaches or policies that lump together these two areas. In both cases, however, the lived reality, history and experiences of the population should be central to designing appropriate, effective and sustainable responses to the ongoing obstacles to a stable peace and full recovery.



FULL REPORT

www.fao.org/3/ca5760en/ca5760en.pdf



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