

Karamoja Resilience Support Unit

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Alcohol Consumption, Production and Sale in Karamoja



Tapac Community discarding sachet alcohol



Women preparing sorghum and maize for local brew

Introduction

Alcohol consumption in Karamoja, Uganda's pastoralist-dominated northeastern region, is a well-known and frequently discussed phenomenon in the policy and practice space. Brews made locally of sorghum and maize have sociocultural, nutritional and economic significance. Brewing also serves as a relatively stable and lucrative economic activity for women, in addition to featuring prominently in the adult diet. However, an emerging trend in alcohol use that has become a cause for concern among health officials, development practitioners and, especially, community members themselves is the rise in consumption of hard spirits. The import and production of homemade crude liquor and commercial gin (*waragi*) into Karamoja is said to have increased dramatically in recent years. Reportedly, its consumption has had visible effects on household economy, interpersonal relationships, and the health and wellbeing of the communities.

This briefing paper presents the main findings and key recommendations from a study carried out by the Karamoja Resilience Support Unit (KRSU) in 2018. The study investigated the changing nature of alcohol production, sale and consumption in Karamoja since disarmament. It also examined the structural drivers of alcohol production and consumption and the effects on household economy, interpersonal relationships and health. Field research for the study was conducted in five districts (Moroto, Kaabong, Kotido, Amudat and Nakapiripirit); a total of 503 individuals (40% women), comprising community members, and health, government and development officials, were interviewed.

Main Findings

Changes since disarmament

- There has been an increase in liquor consumption in the post-disarmament period due to its widespread availability and the decrease in regional insecurity. The rise in alcohol consumption is also said to be related to a decrease in livestock-based livelihoods and the burgeoning of urban and peri-urban markets.
- With the decrease in numbers of livestock during the raiding and post-disarmament periods, a greater number of people engage in wage labor as a supplementary livelihood. This has increased the availability of cash and the ability to buy the cheap liquor that has permeated the market.
- During the time of intercommunity raiding, people needed to be vigilant to ward off attacks or safeguard their livestock. The need for this vigilance has markedly decreased since the guns were removed.¹ As a



consequence, people are free to drink until late hours in urban and peri-urban centers and walk back to rural areas without threat of attack.

- The secure environment of Karamoja has also contributed to the burgeoning of markets, leading in turn to the massive import of commercial *waragi* (at the time of the study, typically in 100 milliliter sachets).
- The decreased insecurity and expanding markets afford the opportunity for sale of local brews as well. Drinking joints have sprouted up around Karamoja in rural and urban centers, allowing women to make a substantial living but simultaneously contributing to the alleged increase in alcohol consumption.

Structural drivers of alcohol production, sale and consumption

- Although hunger and social/traditional factors are commonly listed as reasons for consuming local brew, the triggers for the consumption of hard spirits range from economic to social to psychological reasons.
- An important driver of increased liquor consumption is shifting livelihood strategies. The increased dependence on the wage labor market, the availability of cash, and the growing urban and peri-urban centers were listed as contributing to the increase in hard alcohol use.
- Livelihood-related stress is cited as a key reason driving the increased consumption of hard liquor. Although all age groups are affected by the lack of stable and well-paying work, the problem appears to be particularly acute among rural and urban youth. Youth reported the improbability of investing in productive assets such as education or livestock (due to paltry wages), which not only influences their ability to establish a family but also leads to feelings of dejection and “hopelessness.”
- Stressors from lack of employment, loss of employment and other factors were reported by respondents across the youth and middle age groups. Respondents listed marred interpersonal relationships, inability to provide for children and problems in sufficiently meeting basic household needs as constant stressors that drive people to drink.
- Peer pressure was another trigger of alcohol consumption, especially among youth. Some respondents believe that alcohol-drinking habits develop in the

company of friends or peer group members who “are already spoilt.”

Factors influencing alcohol production, sale and consumption

- The making of local brew varies by season due to climatic factors, access to inputs, economic considerations, and patterns of leisure time and social and economic activities. Seasonality influences the availability and cost of ingredients for making local brew. Respondents agreed that brewing increases in the post-harvest period when grains are available and/or cheap to purchase. Post-harvest is also a busy time for ceremonies, harvesting and construction activities, all of which are accompanied by the consumption of local brew. Unlike local brew, consumption of hard spirits is relatively constant throughout the year.
- Locational factors such as living in peri-urban and urban areas or around mining sites also contribute to higher alcohol consumption, as these areas have ready availability of cheap liquor and local brew.
- Age is also an important factor driving alcohol consumption. There was unanimous opinion that youth—both male and female—were the primary and heaviest drinkers. Youth themselves agreed with this assessment.
- Lastly, the availability and affordability of sachet *waragi* at the time of the study was also listed as an important factor behind its mass appeal.

Effects on communities of alcohol production, sale and consumption

- Excessive consumption of liquor has had visible effects on the health of community members. Some of the main signs of alcohol abuse as recounted by participants are frail body, weight loss, redness of mouth and lips, coughing, and even death.



- At the household and community level, there has been a noticeable rise in interpersonal conflicts, including gender-based and domestic violence, which is frequently attributed to increased hard liquor consumption. Elders feel that youth no longer respect age-related authority. Divorce, separation and family breakages were commonly reported.
- Bartering or selling of grains from household granaries in exchange for alcohol was widely reported. In addition, spending on alcohol—both local brews and liquor—is also said to have increased. Money from the household is reportedly being diverted towards alcohol purchase, which is having a purported negative impact on the household economy.

Recommendations

Support promising local initiatives, learning across districts and scaling up

In Karamoja, there is already high awareness of the problems caused by excessive alcohol consumption at the community level, and among health workers and government officials. Some local initiatives to reduce these problems have started, largely without external assistance. There is an opportunity to bring the actors—especially community members—involved in these initiatives together, collectively review successes and failures, and identify good practices for scaling up in other areas. As part of this process, it is important that:

- Professional stakeholders avoid taking a moralistic approach and involve community members of all demographics in crafting a community-based approach to dealing with the issue of excessive consumption of *waragi*;
- The dialogue and resulting actions make a clear distinction between the problems caused by *waragi* and other hard liquor, and the practice of local brewing and its economic importance to women in Karamoja.

Specific actions that warrant broad stakeholder analysis in terms of their relevance and likely impact include:

- Reviewing the work done to regulate excessive drinking (for e.g., in Tapac Sub-county in Moroto District) and how it might be adapted and implemented in other areas;
- Learning from changes in local legislation, and how best to write and structure new bylaws to prevent alcohol abuse. Assess the extent to which new bylaws or regulations can be enforced;

- At the level of health services and health extension:
 - o Examine options for culturally appropriate non-judgemental programs to raise awareness among communities about the negative health and wellbeing impacts of excessive alcohol consumption;
 - o Consider if health workers at multiple levels (including village health technicians (VHTs)) should be trained (or re-trained) to recognize signs of alcohol overuse/abuse and seek to mitigate harmful behaviors;
 - o Assess if local counselling or other support services (e.g., staffed by dedicated VHTs or others) can provide help when people want or need it, whether as a family member or an individual with an abuse problem. Such services would need to be advertised;
 - o Assess if tax revenues from alcohol can be reinvested in health and education activities related to alcohol abuse.

As part of this process, stakeholders also need to consider the options for targeting interventions both geographically and socially. For example:

- Should efforts be targeted at areas with particularly high rates of drinking, such as mining areas and congested peri-urban settlements? If so, how?
- How can male and female youth be targeted, as they are said to be the heaviest drinkers? Should programs involving livelihood support, financial literacy, technical and skills-based training, etc. be used? If so, how?



Retail sale of sachet alcohol

Support further evidence gathering and learning

- Assist ongoing and new initiatives to reduce alcohol-related problems and to monitor and assess the impact of these efforts, including through participatory and community-based methods.
- Work with community and professional stakeholders to identify evidence gaps and key information that is still needed to guide new approaches and programs. Fill these evidence gaps with relevant studies and reviews as needed. Provisional topics, not yet verified with stakeholders, include:
 - o The role of brew, residue and drinking in child nutrition;
 - o If and when people want to cut back or stop drinking in the region, how do they do it? Where do they turn? Is this successful?
 - o Investigate how women's earnings from brewing could be better harnessed. By understanding how and why women in particular benefit from this industry, stakeholders might be able to come up with programs that seek to replicate the aspects of brewing that are so beneficial to them.

Use evidence to advocate for policy improvements

- Advocate for tax revenues from the sale of commercial alcohol to be invested in health, education and welfare programs in Karamoja.



Preparation of local brew

Acknowledgements

This Briefing Paper was written by Dr. Padmini Iyer. Read the full report here: *The Silent Gun: Changes in Alcohol Production, Sale and Consumption in Post-Disarmament Karamoja*. Photos credits: Father Jurey James Dela Cerna (page 1 top left and bottom right); Thomas Cole (page 1 top right, page 2); Tebu Arukol (page 3); Padmini Iyer (page 4).

Karamoja Resilience Support Unit (KRSU)

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For more information about the KRSU:

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Endnote

ⁱ This study was conducted in 2018 and does not account for the recent armed raids in Karamoja.