

Why poverty persists despite

Karamoja Sub-region has endured decades of government interventions, donor programmes, food relief cycles, and countless strategic frameworks. Billions of shillings have been poured into the region. But it still remains the poorest place in Uganda, with chronic hunger, low literacy, weak markets, limited livelihood security, and persistent cattle theft, writes **Toit Charles Atiya**

At 6:40 pm in Nakapelimoru Village, the sun sinks behind the hills, staining the sky orange. In a small manyatta (small hut), 17-year-old Perter Lomilo crouches over a pot of boiling leaves—*ekorete*—because there is no food. His younger siblings hover around him, dizzy with hunger. School ended for them two years ago; the family could not afford even the “free” education costs.

This is Karamoja in 2025—a region that has absorbed billions in government programmes, donor funds, and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) attention. Yet today, people still boil wild leaves for dinner, youth roam trading centres searching for nonexistent jobs, and districts rank at the bottom of nearly every human development indicator in Uganda.

Against this grim backdrop, President Museveni's fresh capital promises ahead of the 2026 elections—including special funds for youth skilling, iron sheets re-distribution schemes, and a revitalised wealth creation agenda—have been received with cautious hope and deep skepticism.

In Nakapelimoru, Lonrengochora, and Rupa, the question is whispered in manyattas and sung in youth circles: “If the pledges are fulfilled, why does poverty still live with us?”

Karamoja has endured decades of government interventions, donor programmes, food relief cycles, and countless strategic frameworks. Billions of shillings have been poured into the sub-region. Yet it remains the poorest place in Uganda, with chronic hunger, low literacy, weak markets, limited livelihood security, and persistent cattle theft that, cycles between criminality and survival.

This is the story of a broken, fractured region—Karamoja has heard promises before. It has also been forgotten before. We examine why.

Karamoja's development trajectory has long been shaped by two competing paradigms: The Security Lens. Since the 1970s and 1980s, government policy has primarily framed Karamoja as a security problem focusing on disarmament, cattle rustling, and military operations. This approach, though necessary at times, has dominated development planning, often sidelining livelihoods and social services.

The Humanitarian Lens. Decades of drought, famine cycles, and humanitarian aid have entrenched a relief-oriented economy. The region has more NGOs warehouses than functional factories, and food aid remains a routine expectation rather than an emergency measure.



From the Karamoja Integrated Development Plan (KIDP) to Operation Wealth Creation (OWC), and most recently the Parish Development Model (PDM), each initiative came with large budgets and political fanfare. Yet the outcomes on the ground remain depressingly similar: lowest literacy rates in Uganda, highest levels of malnutrition and stunting, chronic food insecurity, minimal private sector activity, poor infrastructure and near-zero industrialisation.

Whitaker Peace and Development organisation working in Karamoja in its report titled “A focus on literacy rates” published in July, 2024, states that Karamoja Sub-region is one of the poorest and most challenged areas, and has the lowest literacy rates of the country, with less than 24 percent compared to the national average of 72 percent. Karamoja has always been in the plan. It has rarely been in the results.

HUNGER KILLS 900

In 2022, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (Unicef) and government of Uganda statistics indicated that in every 10 households, they were either critically food-insecure or simply food-insecure, meaning they have no food to eat or limited stock, barely lasting a month to three.

Multiple leaders then, citing compilations by local governments and

the domestic spy agency, ISO, said more than 900 Karimojong, mainly children and elderly, had succumbed to hunger-related diseases by July same year. Mr Lote Paul Kodet, the Kotido chairperson, then said the district had lost 626 residents, mainly elders and children aged 3-6, to hunger-related causes in over five months. “NRM government should come to the rescue of the people of Kotido by providing adequate food supply,” he was quoted by this newspaper.

Some of the Karimojong who were stopped at a checkpoint in Iriri in Katakwi District in 20210. They were reportedly on their way to Kampala city to look for means of survival. PHOTO/FILE

Youth, women and leaders voices

“I finished Senior Six in 2021,” 19-year-old Caral Apalorot, from Moroto District, says.

“My classmates in Kampala are working or at university. For me, the only job I got was quarrying sand for Shs5,000 a day.”

Her dream is to become a nurse, but the district's scholarship programme collapsed years ago.

In Nablatuk District, a mother of six, Nareng, sits beside a dry seasonal riverbed.

“Every election season, they come with promises—tractors, goats, money for women groups. After elections, we never see them again,” she says.

A senior district planner in Kaabong District, who prefers to speak on condition of anonymity, admits that allocations often arrive late—if at all.

“We submit budgets, but releases are unpredictable. Last year, our agricultural extension officer positions remained unfunded while the region received thousands of kilograms of seeds without proper planning,” he says. Elders argue that development programmes ignore pastoralist identity. “They want us to farm, but they don't give us water or irrigation. They want us to settle, but they provide no services,” an elder from Tepeth, says.

The policy bottlenecks

Karamoja's planning has been dominated by security agencies rather than economists, agriculturalists, or community planners.

This has resulted into reactive rather than long-term interventions, prioritization of peacekeeping over production and has generated mistrust between communities and the State

Different ministries run overlapping projects; Ministry of Karamoja Affairs, Ministry of Gender (for youth funds), Ministry of Agriculture, Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) humanitarian wing, OWC, PDM, Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme (UWEP)... No central coordination. No unified development strategy.

Poor coordination among stakeholders, including government bodies, NGOs, and development partners, has been a persistent challenge for development initiatives in Karamoja. This has led to issues such as service replication, inefficient resource allocation, and a lack of unified strategy for addressing the region's complex challenges.

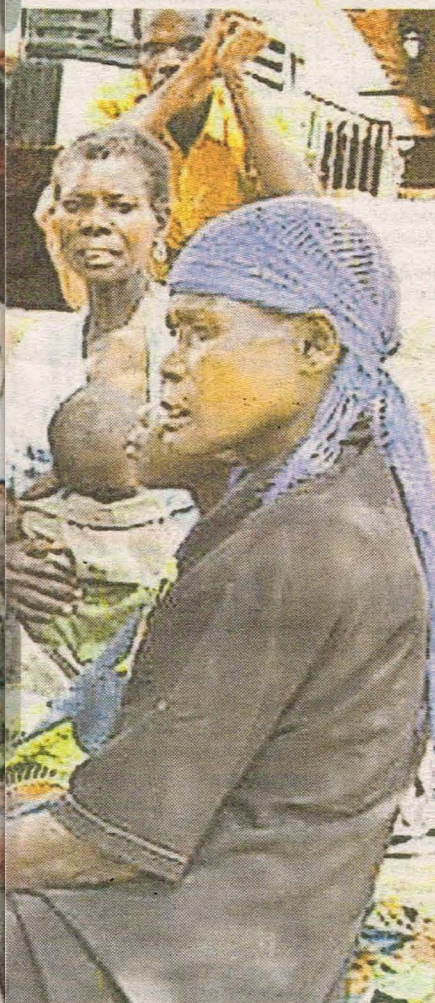
The key aspects of the problem are seen in the duplication of services, lack of unified planning and strategy, weak governance coordination capacity, limited community consultation, and security challenges.

The Ministry of Karamoja Affairs is designated as the main coordinating body, but it requires sufficient staffing and skills to work effectively with the diverse range of international partners. Without this capacity, development partners may be less committed to a centralised approach.

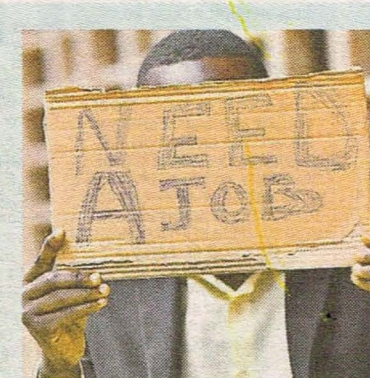
Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MoFPED), through its own budget monitoring unit, (BMAU) in a Briefing Paper of March, 2024, reviewing projects in Karamoja, observes: “There is slow implementation of all PRDP projects in Karamoja resulting from; uncommunicated budget cuts, which crowd out service delivery, poor coordination between OPM and MoFPED in communicating the final planning figures and delays

84% YOUTHS EXPERIENCING POVERTY

capital pumped in Karamoja



“In a region long inhabited traditionally by cattle keepers, the rush to get the regions precious minerals (gold, limestone, and marble) is damaging key water sources and stirring social unrest. Locals talk of being displaced from their ancestral farmlands by land grabbers while others are now suffering from many diseases... blamed on consuming water from contaminated sources...” 2021 *Ubuntu Times* report



“I finished Senior Six in 2021. My classmates in Kampala are working or at university. For me, the only job I got was carrying sand for Shs5,000 a day. Mr dream is to become a nurse, but the district's scholarship programme collapsed years ago...” 19-year-old Caral Apalorot from Moroto District

ballot boxes leave.

Karamoja's development narrative is tightly interwoven with Uganda's election cycles. Every five years, the region becomes a stage for political symbolism. New wealth-creation initiatives are launched hurriedly; funds are pledged; and previous failed interventions are rebranded as fresh solutions.

In 2025 alone, the region has been promised 10,000 youth supported under capital skilling schemes, livestock restocking under renewed OPM programmes, solar-powered valley dams and irrigation models, support to revive the collapsed cattle economy, and increased sharing of mineral revenues with host communities.

These promises mirror those of 2021, 2016, and 2011. Some are copies of pledges made in the late 1990s under the Karamoja Integrated Disarmament and Development Programme.

In the case of the Ugandan State, the meeting point of war (represented by the 1980s Bush War), coercion (represented by contemporary State power) and capital (represented by the donor) can be located in the poverty reduction policy arena.

Poor infrastructure, markets

Roads linking Moroto-Kotido-Kabong remain patchy. Electricity coverage is minimal. Such isolation means: high transport costs, no industry, and low investor confidence. This is definitely a region stuck in the same storyline.

As Uganda enters the charged 2026 election season, Karamoja is once again at the centre of renewed political interest. Presidential convoys return, government officials inspect long-forgotten projects, and pledges of capital injections echo across trading centres—from Kaabong to Amudat. It is a familiar sound: promises of tractors, restocking livestock, modern markets, valley dams, youth skilling centres, and mineral wealth-sharing programmes.

Yet on the ground, nothing feels new. This is a fractured story—a region where development rises during election years but collapses once the

Each cycle faises hope—and disappointment.

Local leaders argue that election-year interventions are often politically timed, short-term, and lack follow-through. Once campaigns end, the pace slows. Funds dry up. Projects stall. Contractors vanish.

The result is a pattern of “start-stop development” that leaves Karamoja locked in the same struggles.

In sharp contrast to the year-in-year-out promises, Uganda Bureau of Statistics' (Ubos) 2023/2024 National Household Survey report captures Karamoja's poverty rate as dire. It stands at 74.2 percent, which is four times the national average, despite a national decline in poverty to 16.1 percent.

The same Ubos report says an estimated 84 percent of the youth in Karamoja were experiencing multidimensional poverty.

While the United Nations Programme

office in 2023 noted that economic regression, food insecurity, and unemployment and inequality among women and youth all resulted in the loss of lives and livelihoods in the sub-region. This has discounted the country's development prospects and achievements, especially of the Sustainable Development Goals SDGs.

Mr Ambrose Toolit, the Executive Director of Grassroots Alliance for Rural Development (GARD), told local media in a previous interview that although poverty and underdevelopment in Karamoja have been attributed to conflict, it has since experienced relative peace, but poverty levels remain high.

He estimates that Karamoja has received up to Shs1 trillion from international development donor partners through the central government, local government, UN, international NGOs, and local NGOs in the last 10 years.

“But in real development terms, it's difficult to point to or put a figure to this money,” he concludes.

Mr Johannes Mbabazi of the Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (Acode), is of the same view. He, however, admits that on realising this challenge as civil society, they have intervened and are trying to get stakeholders to account for the resources they invest in the region.

The coordinator Restless Development Uganda, Mr Henry Napokol, agrees that the resources injected in the region have not positively impacted the communities. He attributes this situation to a lack of accountability.

“The people do not understand the activities and investments offered for their transformation,” he says.

The chairperson of the Elders Association, Mr Simon Nangiro, wonders why several accountability bodies have been assessing the project implementations but failed to track how the resources are being spent.

The Minister of Karamoja Affairs, Mr Simon Peter Lokeris, on the other hand, remains confident about the progress in Karamoja. In an interview with a local media house, he says the region is gradually transforming through the collaborative efforts of the government and development partners.

The 2016 donor mapping report compiled by the then USAID-supported Karamoja Resilience Unit (KRSU) indicates that the 10 donors, including: USA, World Bank, Irish Aid, SIDA (Sweden), EU, Germany, Japan, KOICA (Korea), and Italy, provided a significant majority of the external funds flow to Karamoja.

Climate stress, environmental neglect

Karamoja is a climate hotspot. Yet: no substantial irrigation investments exists, grazing corridors remain unplanned, drought resilience programmes are underfunded and education is collapsing: teacher absenteeism, classroom shortages, early marriages, hunger pushing pupils out of school. Health services remain inadequate with frequent stock-outs and understaffing.

The iron sheets scandal of 2023 still haunts the region. Many residents fear new capital injections for the election season may follow the same pattern.

Missed Opportunities

Karamoja's comparative advantage is livestock—yet policy favours crop agriculture despite erratic rainfall.

A modern livestock value chain (dairy, meat processing, hides and skins) would transform the region—but there is no robust investment.

Gold, marble, limestone, and rare earth minerals are abundant. But communities gain almost nothing, illegal and exploitative mining persists, no transparent revenue-sharing model exists.

Ubuntu Times, an online publication in a 2021 story titled: “Mining Rush Threatens Indigenous Peoples in Karamoja Uganda,” points out a series of challenges from land grabbing, impact on the environment to challenges on indigenous rights.

The report says despite billions of investments into mining projects that arguable injected new life to the region in form of jobs, in the same vein it has brought new problems threatening livelihoods of millions of the Karimojong.

“In a region long inhabited traditionally by cattle keepers, the rush to get the regions precious minerals (gold, limestone, and marble) is damaging key water sources and stirring social unrest. Locals talk of being displaced from their ancestral farmlands by land grabbers, while others are now suffering from many diseases, including skin infections and diarrhoea, blamed on consuming water from contaminated sources, as some miners use hazardous chemicals, including mercury to extract gold.”

With stunning landscapes, unique culture, and proximity to Kidepo National Park, Karamoja could be a tourism hub. But lack of infrastructure and branding keeps tourists away.

Young people run small shops, boda boda businesses, carpentry solar repair, and crafts—but lack capital, training, or market access.

The presidential promise of “Karamoja youth industrial hubs” has yet to materialise beyond speeches.

What must change

There is need of a shift from security led- to economic lead planning. Karamoja needs economists, engineers, and planners—not just soldiers.

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A man treats his child using leaves from the wilderness in Karamoja. Locals say many areas don't have health centres. PHOTO/FILE