

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 **Tolit Charles Atiya**

At 6:40pm 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. Schooled 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, Lonrengechora, 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

Some of the Karimojong who were stopped at a checkpoint in Iri in Katakwi District in 2020. They were reportedly on their way to Kampala 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 Nabilutuk District, a mother of six, Narene, 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.

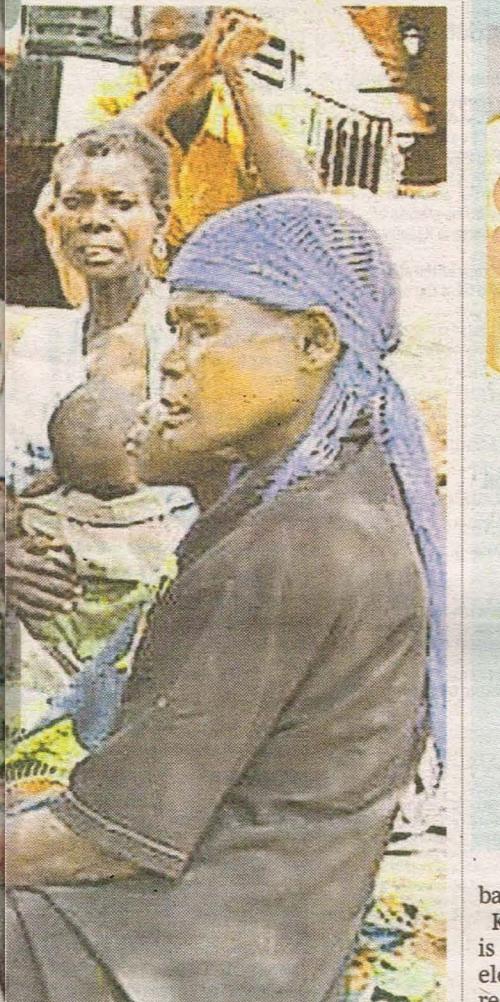
“They want us to farm, but they don’t give us water or irrigation. They want us to settle, but they provide no services,” an elder from Tepeth, says.

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

84% YOUTHS EXPERIENCING POVERTY



Minerals curse. “In a region long inhabited traditionally by cattle keepers, the rush to get the region’s 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**

Unemployment. “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**

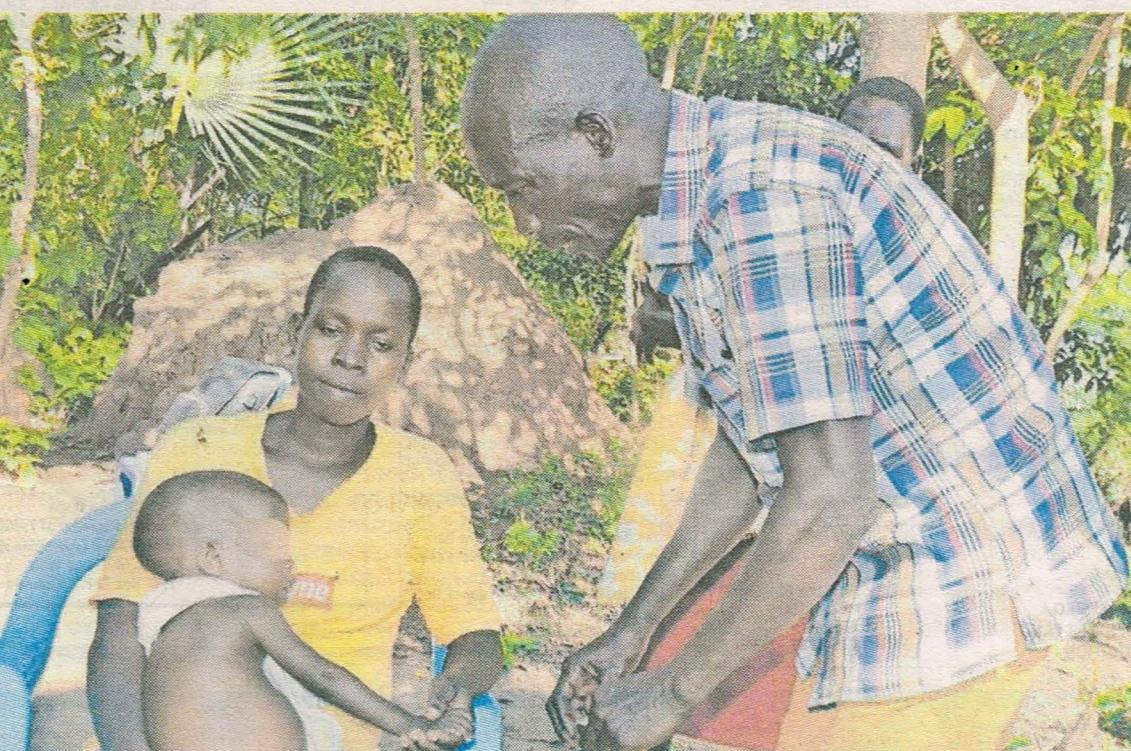
ballot boxes leave.

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 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



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

Tolit Charles Atiya (PhD Fellow of Defence and Security Group King’s College London)

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.

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 report says despite billions of investments into mining projects that arguably 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 region’s 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.

Special Report