

USAID'S SECURING PEACE AND PROMOTING PROSPERITY IN KARAMOJA ACTIVITY (EKISIL)

COVID-19 and CONFLICT ANALYSIS IN KARAMOJA

Introduction

The EKISIL¹ team (Mercy Corps, AWOTID, Riamriam and DADO) is implementing a three and half year program funded by USAID in Karamoja with the goal of helping male and female adults and youth secure a more peaceful and prosperous future. USAID's *Securing Peace and Promoting Prosperity in Karamoja* Activity (EKISIL) is a Conflict Mitigation and Management Project that uses a *people-to-people approach (P2P)* to bring groups together across divisions to address underlying social, economic, ecological, and governance issues at risk of fueling conflict in Karamoja region. This is achieved through three interlinked objectives that address root causes of inter-ethnic conflict and promote reconciliation, empower local capacities to prevent and manage conflicts, and address emerging conflicts related to land. It is implemented in all 9 districts of Karamoja.

Context Analysis: COVID 19 and Conflict dynamics in Karamoja

At the end of 2019, a novel coronavirus was identified in Wuhan, a city in the Hubei Province of China. It rapidly spread resulting in a pandemic, now called COVID 19. As of May, 2020, Uganda had registered over 100 cases, and as a result imposed stringent restrictions across the country including movements and office closures. These restrictions have affected our work plan and are likely to continue to disrupt plans for the next several weeks.

According to the Mercy Corps Strategic Resilience Assessment (STRESS²), Karamoja is a region in transition socially, ecologically, and economically. Recent peace and security have brought new economic opportunities, market development, and possibilities for forging more equitable gender roles. However, the decline of highly adaptive pastoral livelihoods and frequent shocks and stressors from a variety of sources are challenging the resilience of populations in the region.

The region just recovered from the December-February 2020 turbulent time where conflict escalated to high levels as a result of rearmament of warriors who acquired guns from neighboring countries of Kenya and South Sudan. While the conflict stabilized by March 2020, COVID-19 may have additional far reaching effects on conflict dynamics in Karamoja. The closure of livestock markets, diversion of security forces to fight COVID-19 and locusts, and limited trade and movement of goods may result in hard times for the communities and warriors may strike again. The restrictions may also affect the movement of pastoralists in search of water and pasture, resulting in dire consequences on the health of livestock and local economy as a whole. During and post COVID-19, the entire sub region, like any other part of the world, will feel the pinch of the pandemic and secondary impacts of the pandemic may cause conflict to climb.

The threat of COVID-19 is being compounded by the invasion of Desert Locusts that have been rampaging and feeding on vegetation and crops in the region. Depending on the speed at which the Karamoja region is able to recover, **economic, social, governance and ecological** impacts are likely to fuel short and long term conflicts.

¹ EKISIL means PEACE in Karamoja local language

² Mercy Corps, Strategic Resilience Assessment (STRESS)-August 2016.

Social impact

Gender Based Violence: Stay at home policy will alter gender roles in the households and GBV may rise. Women are supposed to go out and look for food while men spend time grazing animals and converging under trees to drink or discuss clan related issues. Under the stay home policy, this may not be possible, forcing men and women to stay home or not gather under trees or centers due to social distancing. This may result in disputes and GBV, especially against women, which undermines the family values and social cohesion. In the post disarmament era, it is reported that GBV against women was on the rise due to men and young men staying at home as they were no longer moving long distances for raids. In the EKISIL Gender Assessment Report, July 2018, “as cattle raids subsided as the primary threat to peace and security, new forms of violence and conflict emerged, including Sexual and Gender-Based Violence. In all the four districts, SGBV came up repeatedly, across gender and age groups, as a significant threat to women and communities’ continued security and well-being”³. EKISIL has been addressing this threat through the Women Peace Forum and is using this forum during COVID-19 to sensitize communities using radio talk shows.

Social distancing, isolation and trauma: As communities get isolated in their areas and social distancing takes effect, the social support systems (resources sharing, eg food,) inter-communal cohesion and trust is likely to lessen. This will likely worsen if one community or individual gets infected, leading to increased social distancing and isolation by the other communities. Trauma is healed through community interactions and support systems which may not be possible. Although this isolation and social distancing may be short term, a single incident in communities affected by deep rooted conflicts trigger massive traumatic episodes that are likely to project into the future. Trauma affects people's ability to think and believe in the future and may lead to individuals resorting to violent means of resolving conflicts. In the recent report titled “COVID-19: Survivors Fund reports rise in trauma cases” by the Genocide Survivors Association in Rwanda, “social distancing directives put in place by the government to protect citizens from contracting the coronavirus meant that most of the survivors were having challenges that are normally lessened by human contact”⁴ In Karamoja, EKISIL is conducting Trauma Healing targeting groups that were affected by conflict and have realized positive results. “The trauma healing sessions have helped in the reduction of conflicts both within the communities and with neighboring communities. The reduction is as a result of the participants changing their behaviors and the fact that even non-participants attended the sessions and were keen to learn,” (Mr. Lokuwam Joseph, facilitator, Lolelia sub county)⁵. In post COVID-19, there will be a need to expand trauma healing initiatives to support communities recovering from the effects of isolation and stress and EKISIL has laid a strong foundation since 2017.

Animosity towards foreigners: COVID-19 is a disease that came from outside this country and was first detected in the Central Region of the Country. Communities are suspicious of people who come from outside the country and come from other communities in the same region or country. Therefore, the term foreigner is being understood as not only people coming from outside the country, but also people coming from other communities within Uganda. This suspicion will be aggravated if one of the neighboring communities is infected and other communities react negatively to the infection. In Moroto, Rupa Sub county, EKISIL supported the District Task Force to intervene and stop a standoff between the local community and foreign miners, who had been evicted from a gold and marble mine, accusing them of bringing COVID-19 virus to their community. The same scenario was reported in Kaabong district as well.

Economic impact

³ Mercy Corps: EKISIL Gender Assessment Report, July 2018

⁴ The New Times News Paper: COVID-19: Survivors Fund reports rise in trauma cases.

<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/covid-19-survivors-fund-reports-rise-trauma-cases>. Accessed on April 18 2020.

⁵ Mercy Corps: EKISIL Trauma Healing Review and Lessons, April 2019.

Food shortages at family and community level may increase thefts: In short run, secondary shocks and stress related to COVID-19 will be felt at the family and community level due to lack of food, which will likely result in stealing from households or compounds of NGOs as they “stay at home”. There is also a likelihood that warriors may start stealing animals within the clan as they search for food. For example, the drought that hit the region starting from October 2018 and continued up to May 2019 led to the death of animals⁶ and depletion of food in the region. Food shortages⁷ were commonly reported. In Kaabong district, the price of a kilogram of maize hiked to 7,000 UGX as compared to 3,000 UGX in the same season in previous years. There was a linkage between this food deficiency and security as thefts of livestock increased, highlighting the need for peacebuilding activities. In most cases, due to its fragility, any shock that hits this region results in conflict.

Hard economic times and its effects: The closure of markets⁸ – a key source of income, and disruption of the circular flow income⁹ into the region will render communities more vulnerable and as a result, youth are likely to resort to use of force to fend for their families. Karamojong live and die by cattle and any disruption such as general closure of the livestock market with no other source of employment, affects their only source of livelihood, security, self-respect and dignity. Livestock raids in the post COVID-19 period may likely escalate as many people will have used all the resources available during this lockdown. Recent raids that were conducted in late 2019 and 2020 were purely commercially driven as warriors turn to using violence to get money.

Governance impact

COVID-19 and its effect on informal governance institutions: The informal governance institutions headed by elders have not been fully engaged during the COVID-19 and this will continue during post COVID-19, which will likely impact communities’ willingness to adapt COVID response behaviors and practices. Directives from the central government empower the Resident District Commissioner and the District Health Officer to lead the task force and decide on who to include on the task force. The district and sub county task forces are responsible for all decisions and elders who are powerful and respected by the community will likely feel marginalized and this has an effect on future collaboration. With elders not in charge of decisions affecting their communities, this will likely widen the already wide gap between the formal and informal institutions which affect information sharing and conflict early warning and response. EKISIL is working with the district task force to ensure that elders are included in the Sub County Task Force –a structure that is near the community.

Disruption of targeted disarmament by COVID-19: In February 2020, security forces started a limited disarmament campaign to extract guns that had escalated conflict in late 2019 and early 2020 however this was disrupted by locusts and COVID-19 and these guns are still in the hands of warriors.

⁶ <https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/700-animals-die-Karamoja-drought-Amudat-Nakapiripirit/688334-5083234-631to9/index.html>. Accessed on April 23 2019

⁷ <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/business/Region-braces-for-tough-times-as-food-crisis-is-forecast/2560-5082502-a8kvja/index.html>. Accessed on April 22 2019

⁸ PMLDaily: COVID-19 CRISIS: Govt closes all livestock markets countrywide over COVID-19. <https://www.pmldaily.com/business/2020/04/covid-19-crisis-govt-closes-all-livestock-markets-countrywide-over-covid-19.html>. Accessed on April 9 2020.

⁹ Circular flow of Income represents money moving through the economy. It shows how households purchase goods and services from businesses by using the income they earned from firms by working for them

Trust between the local community and leadership in the recovery phase: The level and the targeting of resources injected in the region to deal with impact of COVID-19 and locust's will determine the level of trust and conflict between the leadership and communities. The community will likely perceive slow response to the region's recovery as further marginalization and may result into attacks within and outside the region.

Cross border governance and conflict dynamics: With limited communication between local leaders in Uganda, Kenya and South Sudan during and post COVID-19, the warriors from Kenya and South Sudan Counties bordering Karamoja are likely to turn to the soft target-Karamoja without arms-when hard times hit and launch attacks. Even in post COVID-19 these neighboring countries may take time to discuss cross border conflicts as they focus on their internal affairs. EKISIL phase 2 plans to engage the Turkana grazing in Uganda but this may need to be expanded to cross border engagement especially with the senior leaders in both South Sudan and Kenya.

Ecological impact

Disruption of migration patterns in search of water and pasture: Livestock and human migration is a coping mechanism for pastoralists. As climate patterns evolve due to climate change and people are forced to migrate, restrictions such as this one might limit the movement of pastoralists with dire consequences like forceful migration that leads to conflicts. The disruption of migration may likely continue if COVID-19 cases are reported in or around Karamoja and neighboring communities respond by banning livestock entry in fear of COVID-19 spread. Failure to access water and pasture in time for pastoralists is disastrous and leads to conflicts. This may not be the first time the neighboring districts are refusing Karamojong pastoralists to enter their land space. For example, an assessment conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs in February 2019 and supported by EKISIL examined the migration of the Karamajong in Teso, Lango and Acholi regions, and found that some local governments have passed resolutions banning the Karamajong to enter their districts. "Because of climate change dry spell seasons are getting longer, they are more unpredictable, for how long will the neighboring communities continue hosting the Karamojong pastoralists? For example, the assessment team was informed in Agago district how the district council had passed a resolution banning the Karamojong pastoralists from grazing in Agago district"¹⁰. EKISIL, as a result conducted safe migration campaigns to deal with the ban and will work with the Ministry of Internal Affairs in post COVID-19 to build on the previous interventions.

COVID-19 and Locusts invasion: Since the beginning of this year, Karamoja region has been invaded by a swarm of locusts which are rampaging and eating vegetation and crops. COVID-19 has diverted all the attention and resources and locusts are making their way into farms which may have an effect on food security in the region.

Difficulty in enforcement of Resources Sharing Agreements: These are community level agreements/contracts negotiated over time between two or more conflicting communities which detail how resources such as water and pasture are shared, and sets out conflict resolution and accountability mechanisms. These agreements improve trust, accountability and reconciles communities. COVID-19 is likely to escalate trauma and mistrust between communities (see social impact) and enforcing these agreements may prove difficult. These agreements may also be affected if migration of livestock is disrupted (see above) due to restriction as many animals will be converged in one place. EKISIL has facilitated resource sharing agreements between Kaabong and Kotido and have proved effective in building trust and may need to scale them up in other areas in post COVID-19.

¹⁰ Ministry of Internal Affairs, CEWERU: A RAPID ASSESSMENT REPORT OF PEACE AND SECURITY OUTLOOK IN THE KARAMOJA CLUSTER SIDE OF UGANDA, March 2019.

Spread of Livestock pests and diseases: At this time, all efforts have been directed to the fight against COVID-19. With all the district departments overstretched, veterinary services (i.e. vaccination and treatment) are likely to be affected and pests and diseases are likely to rise. Restrictions on movements and converging all animals in one place may also lead to many animal deaths if an outbreak of disease occurs. Karamajong live and die for their animals and any effect on their animals is responded to by violence.

EKISIL response during COVID-19

EKISIL response focuses on ensuring that conflicts related to COVID-19 are preemptively and proactively dealt with. For more information on EKISIL Contingency and Continuity plan refer to this [document](#).

Recommendations for Post Covid-19:

1. Conduct a Conflict Assessment on the secondary impacts of COVID-19. This should be led by the Conflict Early Warning and Early Response Unit (CEWERU) of Ministry of Internal Affairs;
2. Extensive community level trauma awareness and healing to deal with issues of isolation and social distancing. A quick scoping assessment to determine the extent of impact of social distancing and isolation on trauma and conflict is necessary.
3. Peace dividend support in form livelihood to trauma healing groups to deal with issues of economic hardships that risk them descending into conflicts;
4. Community dialogues led by elders and peace committees to deal with relationships and promote information sharing;
5. Establish two-way digital communication channels for information sharing and dispelling misinformation;
6. Institutionalize Resource Sharing Agreements at the sub county and district level so that they are supported with resource stream from the government;
7. Work with existing Regional teams to negotiate access to pasture and water in neighboring regions;
8. Support the existing cross boarder technical committee to immediate reconvene and address issues emanating from transboundary resources sharing and gun supply and demand;
9. Youth forums to build confidence and divert their attention from conflict;
10. Introduce a Target of Opportunity fund (ToO) to deal with an emerging conflict that may not be within the scope of the project. Conflicts targeted under this ToO are those that if not addressed, may affect the work that is being done.

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About Mercy Corps:

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