# Policy Briefing

# Community Solutions to Insecurity Along the Uganda–Kenya Border

In the Karamoja and Turkana border regions of Uganda and Kenya, there is widespread violence including armed robbery, rape, and human rights abuses, yet community complaints about failures of governance remain largely unaddressed. This Policy Briefing highlights how different insecurities reinforce one another in ways exacerbated by the international border. It stresses the need for fulfilment of the two governments' commitments to cross-border solutions, and suggests that international policy actors can help communities gain leverage with governments towards building trustworthy and effective peace and security institutions.

**Communities' increased engagement is already generating shifts in the political and policy space.**

## Key messages

– Pastoralists in the borderlands of Karamoja and Turkana describe five sources of insecurity that feed one another in a vicious circle aggravated by the international border: (1) large-scale cattle raiding; (2) armed robbery of homesteads; (3) violence against women and girls; (4) human rights abuses; and (5) community-to-community revenge attacks.

– Although the violence is often attributed to intercommunal conflict, its root cause is misgovernance – the failure of authorities to work with communities on basic rule of law – and the reliance of national governments on a military solution to borderland instability.

– Communities in the borderlands see the need to act both locally and regionally, using regional agreements and frameworks to hold governments to account.

– Governments and civil society need to integrate pastoralists and their customary institutions into the search for solutions.

**Karamoja–Turkana Community Research Team**

## Introduction

This briefing summarises research led by communities on the Uganda–Kenya border, facilitated by local organisations **Karamoja Development Forum** and **Friends of Lake Turkana**, with support from the **Institute of Development Studies**. A cross-border team – a mix of formally and traditionally schooled elders, youth, women, and men – inquired into long-standing threats faced by their communities. Large-scale and violent cattle raiding, armed robbery of homesteads, attacks on roads, human rights abuses, arbitrary killings, and violence against women are widespread and growing. There are also broader insecurities that fuel distrust in government, such as failure to secure the people's rights to the land, absence of any but the most basic essential services, and inadequate justice.

## The context

The northern section of the Uganda–Kenya borderland is an arid territory with a majority pastoralist population. The people on both sides of the border have the same way of life and a long tradition of collaboration and connection. Distances between settlements are large, the population is scattered, and government services are limited. Herders move their animals in response to the availability of pasture and water under customary governance. Every year, Turkana from Kenya cross the border into Karamoja, Uganda, with tens of thousands of cattle.

Although the two states are co-signatories to intergovernmental agreements for cross-border movement of people and livestock, neither has taken steps to incorporate these into national legal frameworks. Nor has either country invested in enabling a free and safe pastoralist movement. Yet, the need for mobility has increased with the climate crisis and has become more fraught with worsening insecurity. Herders on both sides argue that they have no choice but to carry arms to protect themselves. They explain that they do not condone breaking laws but seek security.

## Interlocking insecurities

Evidence collected by the community teams shows a self-reinforcing system of insecurity and misgovernment. Large-scale cattle raids are carried out by criminal gangs and traders operating between the two countries. Rogue members of the security forces and administrations have tapped into the cattle-raiding networks and made fortunes, according to local understandings.

Despite both governments having carried out disarmament campaigns since independence, hundreds of thousands of livestock have been lost along with uncounted human lives. In the absence of effective protections, homesteads and routes to market have become more prone to armed robbery. Violence against women has increased. With little power to challenge the misgovernance, some people take revenge on neighbouring communities suspected of sheltering informers or criminals.

Complicated by the scale of the task and difficulties of cross-border coordination, disarmament interventions have had little success. In 2006, both governments decided that disarmed civilians needed protection and development, but subsequent operations achieved neither objective. Ugandan initiatives to encourage pastoralists onto farms and eradicate 'nomadism' were unsuccessful.

In November 2022, Ugandan and Kenyan security officials met in Karamoja and agreed yet another campaign; the thousands of Turkana pastoralists carrying guns inside Karamoja should leave or be arrested.

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Neither government sought community support. In February 2023, in a cattle camp overseen by the armed forces, 32 herders were charged with carrying illegal arms and each was charged with terrorism in a military court and sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment. In May 2023, the President of Uganda issued Executive Order #3 of 2023 stipulating that any Turkana herdsman entering Uganda with arms 'must be arrested and charged with terrorism by a Court Martial.' Thousands of Turkana pastoralists moved back to Kenya, even though there was no grazing and a lack of food. The Government of Kenya gave its citizens little political or material support.

## Responsibilities

Karamoja and Turkana communities feel that their people and institutions are blamed for the prevalence of raiding, armed robbery, and violence against women. And with the Government of Uganda labelling armed pastoralists as terrorists, people from both sides feel they have no right of recourse against arbitrary abuse and killings.

Internationally funded non-governmental organisations (NGOs) work on resolving conflicts between communities but can offer little leverage over the misgovernance that fuels the conflicts. As one elder put it, 'the peace that comes on wheels is not peace' .

Evidence shows that weak cooperation with communities fails to build trust and cooperation, and hampers the search for solutions. Security agencies make disarmament decisions behind closed doors. Peace-building NGOs bring pre-packaged

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interventions. Political representatives pursue personal and party interests. None supports local people and their institutions to hold governments to account for failures to uphold national laws, bilateral agreements, or regional protocols.

## Solutions

Men and women community leaders have begun to argue more forcefully for influence. They are engaging politicians, administrators, and NGOs, and gaining responses from the highest levels of the Ugandan and Kenyan governments. But representation is still a long way from critical mass and setbacks are common.

A lasting solution depends on the people and their institutions being able to work formally at all technical and political levels. Community knowledge and action could help deliver better and safer cross-border mobility, and replace a military solution with civilian policing, justice, and development.

Civil society and international actors are well-positioned to help communities expand their analysis, organisation, and representation. They could support them, not only locally but also at national and regional levels. They could back them in upholding rights in the face of powerful moneyed interests whose gaze is on the mineral and energy wealth of these borderlands.

Communities' increased engagement with the Ugandan and Kenyan governments is already generating shifts in the political and policy space. To achieve lasting results, a much larger number of pastoralist spokespeople and community institutions need to be working in concert. They have an inherent interest and capacity to work horizontally across the border, but also need support to work vertically up through often uncoordinated administrative and political systems. Citizens are asking for donor backing to achieve the critical mass of community voice and inclusion that is needed for sustained peace.

## Policy recommendations

– National governments aiming to improve security for borderland populations should prioritise enhancing formal collaboration with community institutions to co-design and co-implement security, justice, and development interventions.

– International donors and civil society should fund long-term programmes that support communities to represent themselves at scale, at multiple levels of government from local to bilateral to regional.

– International and civil society actors should consider that a project on either side of a border does not equate to a cross-border project unless it addresses the issues created by the border.

– International donors should use their diplomatic leverage to raise concerns about human rights abuses, and respect for international protocols.

– All actors should aim to change the ways these borderlands and their peoples are portrayed in policy and programme documents, executive orders, and media coverage. They should project the citizenship, resourcefulness, productivity, and institutional capacity of borderland populations.

– Supporting local communities to carry out their own research will improve evidence on the drivers of instability in borderlands, help prioritise issues to be addressed, and open pathways for new and inclusive approaches to strengthen governance and the rule of law. Building local research teams that cross borders and social divisions such as gender, age, ethnicity, and wealth will support comprehensive and balanced programme design. ■

**Further reading**

Karamoja–Turkana Community Research Team (2023) *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Pastoralist Researchers on the Uganda/Kenya Border*, XCEPT Report, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: **10.19088/IDS.2023.046** (accessed 5 December 2023)

Karamoja–Turkana Community Research Team (forthcoming) *Peace is Not the Absence of Crime, But How Crime is Dealt With*, IDS Working Paper, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies

Stites, E. (2022) *Conflict in Karamoja: A Synthesis of Historical and Current Perspectives, 1920–2022*, Kampala: Karamoja Resilience Support Unit (KRSU), Tufts University