

Why children from Karamoja end up begging on the streets of Kampala

Amid a backdrop of uncertainty, families in Karamoja often rely on alternative mechanisms to secure their livelihoods. Saum Nangiro explains the dynamics among street children in Kampala, and gives policy solutions to address this crisis.

This article is part of our #LSEReturn series, exploring themes around [Displacement and Return](#).

In Karamoja, northern Uganda, people have been facing challenges, both natural and man-made; but have also been innovating a variety of institutional responses to cope with, recover from, and prevent future impacts. Central to these shocks and this coping capacity, but often not valued and under-explored is the role of society, culture and politics. As a pastoral community, social networks have been the bedrock of their survival, anchored on relationships with others – kith and kin.

For decades, the Karamoja region has been characterised by violent conflict, high levels of poverty and food insecurity. It is vulnerable to severe natural disasters with frequent droughts and resulting loss of crops and livestock and historically, has been isolated. The economic growth experienced in the rest of Uganda has had little impact in Karamoja. An estimated 82 per cent of the population lives in poverty. As a result, the area has been dependent on food aid and donor assistance for decades, with numerous emergency aid programs. On a sad note, there is marginalisation of mostly women in the development circles and especially in Karamoja region, leading to high levels of unemployment coupled with limited support to attain high levels of education.

From this background therefore, we see that most families in Karamoja have resorted to alternative sources as a resilience mechanism to have some form of livelihoods in order to survive. The most prominent one is begging and, as children get more sympathy than adults, most of those begging on the street are the former. Families often take children from relatives as far as Kampala in order to provide basic necessities for their families. On the streets of Kampala, the highest population of street beggars are from Northern region of Uganda, including Karamoja.

Not everyone welcomes these street kids from Karamoja. They compete with and face resistance from the older street children and are subjected to caning, or their money is taken away from them. During the rainy season the semi-permanent structure in Kisenyi, a suburb of Kampala, is too crowded and they are supposed to contribute some money for this 'accommodation' despite its poor hygiene. They suffer all kind of diseases and no proper medical attention is offered to them. They are prone to accidents from the street since their main location is at traffic junctions, where cars stop, and they can beg.



In Uganda traffic laws are always violated, especially by the boda-boda (motor bike taxi) riders and street children are frequently knocked down and sometimes sustain fractures from these accidents. Many are taken to Mulango (the Government hospital) for treatment. If a dangerous driver is caught on the spot, he/she will take care of the victim while in hospital, but other children are left to suffer without support or medical attention. The worst happens when children simply disappear from the streets and are never seen again – like the case of Namilo's child, who went missing according to the Daily Monitor paper November 11, 2017.

Numerous street-children are used as sex slaves or forced into prostitution. As many are impregnated because of this, there is a tremendous number of single mothers, aged 12-23 years old.

Back home in Karamoja, parents of the street children do not know the pain and suffering their children are going through and they keep encouraging them to go to beg in the streets of Kampala and other towns in Uganda. Most of the children go for more than 11 months from their families and only return during the Christmas period, when they have accumulated enough items from begging to take to their families. For the parent this is an achievement, but they do not know (or prefer not to know) how much these kids go through while on the street.

The Karamoja leadership, especially members of parliament from the Bokora region which constitutes the greatest number of children, should find possible solutions to bring an end to this problem. These solutions should start with the communities in which these children come from. Alternative sources of livelihoods should be explored in order to reduce the number of street children.

Find out more about the [Politics of Return](#) and our [Trajectories of Displacement](#) research projects, which are based at the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa and funded by ESRC/AHRC.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog, the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa or the London School of Economics and Political Science.