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PUTTING INTO PERSPECTIVE THE OPM 'MABATI' MISAPPROPRIATION AND KARAMOJA IMPROVED GOATS' SAGA



Summary:

This think Piece aims to put in a broader perspective the current debates surrounding the controversial handling by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), and the Ministry of Karamoja Affairs (MKAs) of relief items intended for different categories of vulnerable persons in Karamoja. In calling for a paradigm shift in the discourse on development in Karamoja, it is proposed in the article, that the bureaucratic mechanisms for the delivery of the development in Karamoja need to be re-thought, while paying close attention to the unintended political effects served by recurrent failures.

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Discussions in the corridors of Parliament and public media in the past two to three weeks have been replete with commentaries about two events concerning the handling by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), and the Ministry of Karamoja Affairs (MKAs) of relief items intended for different categories of vulnerable persons in Karamoja. First, it was the revelation of the gross misallocation of almost 50 percent of the Gauge-28 pre-coloured (and OPM-engraved) corrugated iron sheets (*mabati*). Instead of intended beneficiaries in Karamoja, about 5,500 of the *mabati* were donated to (and appropriated by) senior government officials (including 15 Cabinet and State Ministers), for use at their private discretion. Some *mabati* were found in the possession of relatives of the Minister of Karamoja Affairs, Mary Goretti Kitutu in Namisindwa District. Then in quick succession, followed the 74,400 improved goats' saga in Karamoja where each beneficiary (mostly former warriors) was expected to get 16 Galla goats (15 females and 1 Male). Many of the intended beneficiaries either never received any of the improved goats procured by OPM/MKAs; or if they did, received less than they were promised. Some of the improved goats that were distributed in Karamoja have since died, while others have either been eaten, sold off by those who received them or stolen by thieves.



*President Museveni handing over improved goats to Karamoja Leaders in Moroto
(Source: New Vision e-paper)*

On the part of those involved, there has been either quiescence (possibly pointing to a sense of guilt), or name-calling, buck-passing, cover-ups or outright denials of individual responsibility. None has issued any formal public apology. The public is raging with scorn, revulsion and mostly demanding retribution for abuse of office and corruption, as these items were procured using a supplementary budget of UGX. 39.9 billion appropriated by Parliament in December 2022 for the pacification of Karamoja through provision of alternative means of livelihoods.

Way-back between 2016 and 2019, OPM and MKA foresaw the opening of thousands of acres of land in Karamoja for local population to grow their own food, in a bid to turn Karamoja into a food basket. This did not end food insecurity. In fact, in 2020, the numbers of people in Karamoja who became acutely food insecure more than doubled compared to the previous decade. Governments interest and intention of, as well as actions towards 'not-leaving-Karamoja-behind' may be clear, but its outcomes in terms of policy direction and interventions should not be taken for granted.

The OPM in general has been riddled with one scandal after another, year in and out. NUSAF, Refugees, resettlement of landslide victims, re-stocking, etc., regardless of whichever persons are in OPM or sit at the helm of MKA, or the technocrats in either OPM or MKA. Do bureaucratic apparatuses in OPM/MKA acquire a life of their own, which sometime implore them to pursue other interests contrary to its primary functions, irrespective of who is in charge? While it may be deemed inconsiderate to dwell on the OPM/MKA failures at length (amidst a modicum of successes), it is quite instructive to interrogate why the OPM and MKAs keep doing things they know (or do they?) have not worked well before, especially in Karamoja? Is it a case of institutional arbitrariness writ-large at work here in OPM/MKAs? What does it serve in the ultimate?

While the contexts in which the two events occurred are different, the setting is similar, and we aim to make a connection between them in this think piece. They both expose the inherent policy

as well as bureaucratic failures in government's development discourse and delivery mechanisms in Karamoja, and are inadvertently serving political functions unknown to those entangled in them.



One of the structures constructed using OPM 'Mabati' at a private farm of a senior government official in Kayunga District (Source: New Vision e-paper)

If OPM is responsible for coordinating all government business, including annual performances, and monitoring and evaluations of the functioning of all government development programmes in all line ministries and government agencies, why then does it also indulge in any form of implementation involving procurement and distribution of agricultural inputs and relief items for vulnerable people? OPM/MKAs function as planners, implementers and undertake monitoring of themselves at the same time – a clear case of conflicts of interest. In the case of the improved goats, for example, how, and at what point was the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industries and Fisheries (MAAIF) brought on board, if at all?

In the context of Karamoja's depravity, failures can easily (often do) pass without notice. When, however, they become magnified, it is a cause for serious concern. One wonders: is it because the political leaders and technocrats in OPM and MKAs don't read to learn and understand the lessons from past experiences? No, they do read (may be a little). Is it because they do not understand the complexity of Karamoja? Perhaps. But there exist elaborate development programmes and plans intended to guide thinking about, and investment of public resources for transforming Karamoja. Or is some form of failure a norm in OPM/MKAs? One probable reason might be a divergence in the thinking of, and priorities preferred by, the bureaucracy at the helm of the decision making and policy implementation, which is oblivious about the implications of the concrete historical realities that continue to shape the present of Karamoja.

To put this in a proper context, it is important to acknowledge that a lot has changed positively in Karamoja since 2010 (e.g. physical infrastructure such as key roads, schools, health centre have been constructed; access to the national electricity grid, and access to safe water have increased, among others). However, more and more people in Karamoja after 2019 were increasingly unable to get out poverty and remain above the poverty line for long, which is a paradox. Is it not possible that development projects are re-engineering the cultural, social, economic and political structures in Karamoja, without adequately empowering a large number of poor people, and instead, they

are re-enforcing systems that keep them in absolute poverty? While the tip of the iceberg, the 'misplaced' *mabati* and improved goats' saga in Karamoja are a typical manifestation of how interventions intended to contribute to development perform dual, and sometimes contradictory roles – of enriching those who already have (in and outside Karamoja), while disempowering the supposed-to-be Karamojong beneficiaries. These interventions create some 'transformation' (read 'modernisation') without displaying any profound potential for alleviating or eliminating poverty amongst large sections of the local population. Instead, they are simply manufacturing more poor people, and creating conditions for never ending armed conflicts.

The OPM/MKA's philosophy of development of Karamoja is problematic in two ways: (a) their very idea of 'development', and (b) bureaucratic mechanisms through which this development is structured and delivered. There are challenges with the idea of 'development' because of how the problem of Karamoja is now being defined - as largely economic – construed as predominantly the lack of development (as well as opportunities for earning sustainable alternative incomes). Some commentators have argued that it is development that will end armed conflicts associated with cattle thefts and raiding in Karamoja. When the problem is defined in such a modernist perspective, the people of Karamoja are constructed as a constitutive part of the problem. The policy framework within which these interventions are couched is undergirded by misleading perceptions about the Karamojong. They are considered mainly as backward because of their living conditions; and, their economic lifestyle, involving culturally defined, subsistence-oriented livestock keeping activities, seen as largely untenable to the growth of commerce in livestock and livestock products, that are a sine-qua-non of modernity.

We are often so inclined with apportioning blame while we forget the likely political effects of such a development paradigm. To argue like James Ferguson, in his 1994 seminal Book titled '*The Anti-Politics Machine*', that such kinds of development generate political effects that occur unconsciously behind the backs or against the will of those responsible for planning and implementation of interventions is to miss the point. How else could a seemingly incorruptible technocrat like Keith Muhakanizi have failed to stop the current mess in OPM from occurring under his nose in the first place? The upstream political effects entail an increase in state patronage, while disempowering the intended beneficiaries at the down-stream end, both of which have an undesirable potential long-term political consequence of undermining the legitimacy of the state in Karamoja, and thus making it hard to reduce poverty, and end cattle thefts and raiding, and associated armed conflicts.

It is important to clarify that the Karamojong are not nomads, but 'transhumant' cattle keepers (read pastoralists). Many who still depend on their livestock for survival opportunistically track seasonally available pastures and water, across the entire landscape of Karamoja, and sometimes extending into neighbouring districts. A dual settlement system abounds in much of Karamoja. In a typical Karamojong household, mobility is mainly by those involved in herding, usually the youth (*karachuna*) and young adults (male and female), who spend most of their time in the temporary dry season grazing areas. A part of the family comprising children, mothers and the elderly remain in the permanent settlements; and regularly receive supplies of food from those who move with the herds. These movements have become constrained by recurring armed

conflicts associated with continuing livestock theft and occasional raids, and a general reduction in the livestock owned per capita in most of Karamoja.

Due to the affinity Karamojong have to livestock, it is widely believed they are economically irrational for not only keeping them in large numbers, and living mainly in the temporary traditional grass-thatched *manyattas*, but also keeping indigenous low-yielding breeds of cattle, goats and sheep, which they continuously roam with in search of water and pastures as a form of adaptation. In the modernist logic of planners and policy implementers in OPM/MKAs, it is reasoned that the Karamojong could do better by moving less (and ultimately settling down permanently), hence the distribution of *mabati* for them to construct semi-permanent houses; and keeping fewer improved breeds of livestock (cattle, goats, sheep), from which they would earn more income from selling their products (including meat/beef and milk). Hence, their poverty is their own making, for largely being conservative (rigid) for refusing to adopt modern farming, including commercial livestock rearing (read ranching). We will discuss the fallacy of the concept of modernising the Karamojong *manyattas*, and complicated dynamics of crop farming in Karamoja another day.

Perhaps the idea of improving the quality of breeds is not a bad one after all. However, is it feasible given the complexity of current Karamoja context, characterised by severe and prolonged drought, recurrent armed conflicts, a collapsed disease surveillance and control infrastructure, widespread poverty and food insecurity? While the choice by OPM/MKAs to invest significant resources in boosting livestock production is commendable, the logic of the development paradigm entailed in is still top-down, inherently modernist, and to say the least problematic. The continuing high incidences of poverty are explained as a lack of 'enough' development, hence the drive for 'more development' projects. The internal contradictions that keep vulnerable categories in Karamoja out of development are often not interrogated. Some are structural, related to way Karamojong are conscripted into the project called 'development', while others are natural. Climate change in Karamoja is real. For the last two years, Karamoja has not had much rain for an extended period, implying that certain improved livestock breeds cannot adapt easily. The infrastructure for water provision, and disease control and supplementary feed production is limited, making improved breeds a costly undertaking. Only the 'powerful' military, political and bureaucratic elites can marshal sufficient resources to practice modern farming. Ordinary Karamojong cattle keepers accept improved breeds because they are easily converted into cash, if they survive the drought and associated pestilence. Those who succeed with these breeds invest significantly in their survival, and it comes a very high cost which the majority of Karamojong cannot afford. Some of those who in the past have received *mabati* have also equally sold them off, which is understandable, since one needs a lot more resources and materials, other than *mabati*, to construct a decent house.

We need to think about what needs to be done to prevent recurrence of development initiatives in which the intended beneficiaries are by-standers, that create opportunities for gatekeepers (at national and sub-national levels), who have the means to access and secure the benefits from these initiatives, and often deprive those who are intended as beneficiaries. Is it not time to explore the opportunities for restructuring OPM and MKA, while also thinking about a paradigm shift in

the development discourse for Karamoja at the same time? One option is to take any form of implementation of projects and programmes away from OPM/MSKA, and instead consolidate all government economic development planning, and Monitoring and Evaluation functions under OPM which is responsible for coordination and oversight. As it is, MKAs is an unnecessary additional bureaucracy. A lot of attention has already been placed on improvement of the hardware components in development of Karamoja (physical infrastructures, institutions, structures), and all the while paying little or no attention to the softwares, especially the human resource in the bureaucratic apparatuses. There is a total lack of appreciation of the basic national values and principles. There is moral decay, which requires a completely different form of civic education targeting inculcation of new national values and principles. Senior government officials (including cabinet and state ministers), too, need a form of civic education. Meanwhile those responsible for the 'misplaced' *mabati* and improved goats' saga in Karamoja ought to take individual responsibility for their misdemeanours.

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