

POLICY BRIEF

Institutionalizing Peace and Resilience in the Karamoja Cluster

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American
Friends
Service
Committee



Abbreviations

AU	African Union
AFSC	American Friends Service Committee
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EAC	East African Community
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organization
FBO	Faith Based Organization
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority for Development
LPC	Local Peace Committees
PWD	People with Disability
POTUMA	Pokot, Turkana, and Marakwet
SALW	Small arms and Light weapons
ISS	Institute for Security Studies
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

Executive Summary

The Karamoja Cluster, unstable borderland spanning Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, and South Sudan, continues to be characterized by persistent intercommunal and cross-border conflicts, driven by competition over available scarce resources particularly, land, pasture, and water. These conflicts are worsened by climate change, resource scarcity, historical marginalization, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, the psychological effect of past massacres, and the commercialization of cattle raiding by organized groups in contexts of weak state presence and systemic gender inequality.

Although there exist multi-faceted peace structures including formal government bodies, informal community structures and civil society actors, important gaps continue to exist. These initiatives – including elders, faith-based organizations, clan structures, and women and youth groups – often function in isolation with limited coordinated efforts and documented evidence of their long-term effectiveness on social cohesion. Policy frameworks, such as the 2019 Kenya-Uganda Cross-border Programme exists but, they are yet to fully achieve their peace objectives. Women, girls, boys, and PWDs are largely excluded from critical decision-making processes yet they suffer disproportionately from insecurity.

This policy brief, informed by a comprehensive study conducted between August and October 2025, aims to address these deficits by mapping, documenting, and analyzing the reach, functionality, and actual impact of diverse peace structures on social cohesion across the Karamoja Cluster. It outlines a cohesive, multi-level strategy, articulated across four strategic policy corridors, designed to transition the region from reactive crisis management to sustained, integrated, long-term resilience processes. The core strategy mandates the formal institutionalization of grassroots mechanisms and the harmonization of cross-border policies, with specific, actionable recommendations tailored for the most volatile micro-corridors: Dassenech-Turkana, Pokot-Turkana, Turkana- Karamoja, Nyangatom-Toposa, and Karamoja region.

The study's findings point to the crucial need to strengthen local peace mechanisms, heighten cross-border cooperation, and adopt a multi-sectoral approach that promotes inclusivity, economic interdependence, climate resilience, and addresses the psychological dimension of peace and stability.

Recommendations include:

- Establishing a Regional Coordination Mechanism to facilitate a Cluster-Wide/based Strategy for Peace and Resilience.
- Strengthen Inclusive Governance and Cross-Border Security through joint resource management strategies.
- Promote Economic Interdependence and Climate Resilience by dedicating budget lines to peace actors or initiatives.
- Integrate Trauma-Informed Approaches and Transitional Justice processes into peace processes
- Empower Women and Youth in peacebuilding processes
- Invest in Knowledge Management and Dissemination.
- Collaboration and proper coordination through seminars and workshops

Executing these recommendations may enhance more social cohesion, community resilience, and contribute to sustainable peace across the Karamoja Cluster. This multidimensional approach is not simply deliberate; it is a central call to protect especially the individuals who risk their lives to realize peace.

Introduction

The Karamoja Cluster represents a complex and fragile borderland region covering Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, and South Sudan. For decades, this area has been characterized by persistent intercommunal and cross-border conflicts, mainly fueled by conflicts over scarce resources such as land, pasture, and water. These historical tensions are deepened by escalating effects of climate change, increasing resource scarcity, deep-seated historical marginalization, and pervasive proliferation of small arms and Light weapons (SALW). Furthermore, the collective psychology of communities is considerably affected by historical accounts and experiences of massacres and other atrocities, thus propagating cycles of mistrust and conflict.

The context is further complicated by the commercialization of cattle raiding by organized armed groups. Studies conducted by FAO, IGAD & Interpeace (2023) revealed that weak state presence and poor infrastructure hinder effective governance and security responses in these areas in addition to systemic gender inequalities. This exacerbates insecurity and often renders traditional conflict resolution mechanisms to be ineffective. While a range of formal and informal peacebuilding initiatives exists—including traditional elders, faith-based organizations, clan structures, youth and women's peace groups—these efforts are frequently uneven and mostly function in isolation, lacking proper coordination, and with limited documented evidence of their lasting effectiveness or influence on social cohesion.

There is unfolding statistical evidence from organizations and agencies working across this cluster which depicts a worrying humanitarian scenario. Karamoja Cluster conflict has escalated from regular cattle rustling to organized conflict characterized by enormous escalation in death rate, prevalent killings against citizens, and forced dislocation of thousands of people. For example, OCHA (2023) report revealed that over 120,000 people were internally displaced in the Karamoja sub-region due to armed violence and cattle raids. Massacres have also been witnessed in the region. HRW (2023) reports that the Lorengedwat Massacre of May 2022 in Lorengedwat village was one of the most famous incidents, where armed cattle raiders killed over 40 people, including women and children who were hiding in a cave. They were suffocated by smoke from fires set at

the cave's entrance. The creation of high-caliber arms and the failure of past demilitarization efforts have been pointed out as key causes driving this conflicts. Reports (EastAfrican, 2022; ISS, 2022), reveals that there has been a shift from spears and bows to using AK-47s, PK machine guns, and even grenades by raiders frequently obtained from conflicts in neighboring South Sudan and Kenya.

Women, girls, and boys bear a disproportionate burden of insecurity and resource scarcity, yet their voices and participation remain largely marginalized in peace processes and decision-making processes as revealed in a study by Saferworld (2020).

Several policy frameworks have either been signed or adopted in the area among which the cross-border programme for Sustainable Peace and Development (signed between the Kenya-Uganda government in 2019) aimed to promote peace in Karamoja, West-Pokot and Turkana regions although, peace is yet to be fully realized.

Karamoja Cluster is engrained within the framework of the AU and IGAD in implementing programmes and policies that allow for cross-border collaboration on pastoralist development and conflict transformation. Within the AU, the cluster is devoted to the implementation of the Policy Framework for Pastoralist in Africa and the Framework and Guidelines on Land Policy in Africa (FAO, IGAD & InterPeace, 2023; IGAD 2020).

Recognizing these profound challenges and the limited realization of existing policy frameworks, such as the 2019 Kenya-Uganda Cross-border Programme for Sustainable Peace and Development, this study was undertaken to seek other alternative contributions from different actors. It's overarching objective was to contribute significantly to peacebuilding efforts within the Karamoja Cluster by providing a comprehensive understanding of the reach, functionality, and actual impact of formal, informal, traditional, and hybrid peace structures on social cohesion. By scientifically categorizing and analyzing these structures, this work aims to create vital knowledge to inform future programming, coordination, and strategic dialogue for sustainable peace.

A study on Mapping of Peace Structures and their Impact on Social Cohesion in the Karamoja Cluster was commissioned from the Joint Project between the American Friends Service Committee (Salama Hub Project) and the All Africa Conference of Churches, AACC, based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. This study aims to bring its value addition to the peacebuilding efforts in the Karamoja Cluster through mapping of formal, informal, traditional, and hybrid peace structures.

The joint project implemented by the consortium (AFSC and AACC) presents an opportunity to significantly equip African civil society and faith-based organizations in the Karamoja cluster with evidence to influence policy development, thereby promoting peace and social cohesion.

The study also explored the presence and coordination of cluster-based and cross-border peacebuilding approaches, including the inclusion of women and youth, identifying linkages, overlaps, opportunities, or duplications across peace structures. The study was conducted for a period of six weeks (August–October 2025) by a team of experts and peace practitioners. It adopted a mixed-methods approach, with a blend of quantitative but majorly focusing on qualitative participatory research with spatial mapping to ensure a well-rounded perspective on peace structures and social cohesion.

The findings call for a unified approach that points to inclusion, addresses economic and climate vulnerabilities, in addition to addressing historical wounds to promote social cohesion. The findings of the study are summarized below.

Corridor Analysis: Policy Needs and Implications

Sustainable peace and social cohesion call for interventions that are well coordinated and concurrently applied across the four interconnected corridors, and contexts to the distinct dynamics of the Cluster's most volatile micro-corridors. This will ensure policy shifts that translate into tangible peace and long-term resilience.

Corridor 1: Institutionalization and Formal Governance

The first corridor essential for establishing sustainable peace requires formal institutionalization and governance of community peace actors by national governments. It

highlights the need for national governments to formally recognize, integrate, and sustainably finance community peace actors. This initial policy shift entails ratifying legislation to offer legal recognition and operational integration for local peace committees and dialogue platforms within national peacebuilding frameworks, supported by dedicated budget allocations.

In all the four corridors, there are key considerations to be taken into account for example, Ethiopian and Kenya governments should collaborate on protocols and procedures to mutually finance and recognize cross-border traditional structures. Kenyan County governments (Turkana and West-Pokot) should start regular budgets for intra-country peace committees. Further, complementary national peace structures are vital for cross-border training and resource sharing. In areas with limited state reach, such as the Nyangatom–Toposa corridor, there is a need for a paradigm shift to financially supporting and integrating influential cross-border clan and spiritual leaders into official peace processes to ensure sustainable peace thus social cohesion.

Corridor 2: Cross-Border Security and Law Enforcement

Corridor 2 outlines a broad strategy to fight protracted insecurity resulting from cross-border commercial raiding. This requires an establishment of an integrated and reliable approach to security management and the rule of law. The significant policy mandate requires governments to harmonize policies focusing on disarmament, arms control, livestock mobility, and ensure that cross-border criminals are prosecuted. Enactment entails specific actions for corridors among which; establishment of bi-national security agencies and collaborative patrols in the Dassanech–Turkana corridor, control and regulate procedures set for prosecution in Pokot–Turkana, and ensure that that the Joint Mobile Courts established in Turkana–Karamoja corridor are piloted for rapid response on justice issues.

Furthermore, there is a need for regional bodies to ensure proper coordination of international support to monitor checkpoints and control the flow of illicit Small arms and Light weapons especially in the Nyangatom–Toposa corridor. The framework for security should be supported by a Hybrid Justice method that adopts strict fines for cattle raiding while taking into account the existing relevant cultural restorative processes like livestock and "blood compensation."

Corridor 3: Economic Interdependence and Climate Resilience

Corridor 3 opines that sustainable peace in climate-vulnerable areas requires an integration of peacebuilding efforts within economic interdependence and joint resource management strategies to mitigate conflicts deepened by climate variation. A commitment from local and national governments are vital to enhance economic cooperation and establishment of mutually agreed natural resource management plans.

Region-specific strategies require legally-binding water-sharing agreements for the Omo River/Lake Turkana basin, collaborative drought response protocols and access agreements for dry-season resources, invest in cross-border joint markets and shared livestock disease surveillance, and a well-coordinated secure donor investment for rangeland restoration and trade infrastructure. The main policy implication is to ensure that natural resource management are central to peace policies with formal regional resource-sharing agreements and well-coordinated and collaborative climate adaptation strategies from respective governments.

Corridor 4: Inclusivity, Justice, and Social Cohesion

The key focus for corridor 4 is on achieving sustainable peace by overcoming conflict-related psychological wounds and promoting inclusivity, justice, and social cohesion. Governments from respective countries (Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and South Sudan), should enhance substantial representation and inclusion of marginalized groups, particularly, women, youth, and persons with disabilities (PWDs). There is also a need for a minimum 30% quota in all peace and governance committees.

Further, collaborative initiatives: vocational training, entrepreneurship programs, cultural exchanges, and mutual celebrations or festivals to acknowledge shared losses to enhance social cohesion are key. Finally, a culturally-sensitive approach to transitional justice that can promote locally-led truth-telling meetings and traditional reconciliation ceremonies to address past atrocities and restore trust should be established.

Cluster-Wide Policy Implications and Synthesis

Structural change across the Karamoja Cluster requires an integrated, cluster-wide policy framework which centers on four key aspects. First, there is need for governments to regulate formal acknowledgement and integration of informal peace structures, such as elders and peace committees, to allow for effective coordination with government peace institutions and bodies.

Second, natural resource management should be centralized within peace policies, demanding acceptance of formal, regional resource-sharing agreements and collaborative climate adaptation strategies.

Third, effective policy should institutionalize early warning systems, by creating actionable pathways for community-generated security intelligence to promptly inform immediate national and regional security action. Finally, the long-term practicality of peace initiatives demands sustainable financing through dedicated, separated budget lines allocated at both national and local levels, clearly connecting peacebuilding efforts to development outcomes.

Key Challenges Undermining Peace and Social Cohesion

The study noted numerous key challenges hampering effective peacebuilding and social cohesion in the Karamoja Cluster:

Disjointed Peace Architecture and inadequate coordination mechanism:

- Formal governmental bodies, informal community structures (elders, clans), faith-based organizations, and civil society actors largely function in isolation.
- There are inadequate coordination mechanisms among existing peace actors at both national and cross-border levels.

- There is inadequate documented evidence on the long-term effectiveness and influence of existing initiatives on social cohesion, making it difficult to learn and adapt.
- Existing policy frameworks may have the goodwill, but they are yet to fully achieve their peacebuilding objectives due to implementation gaps and insufficient integration.

Deep-Rooted Drivers of Conflict and Insecurity:

- **Resource-Based Disputes:** Intensified competition over shrinking land, pasture, and water resources, primarily driven by climate variability and environmental degradation.
- **Weak Governance and Rule of Law:** Insufficient state presence, poor infrastructure, and limited capacity of security forces contribute to a vacuum exploited by armed groups. Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms are often overwhelmed by commercialized cattle raiding.
- **Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs):** The widespread availability of weapons fuels violence, perpetuates cycles of retaliation, and undermines peace efforts.
- **Historical and Psychosocial Trauma:** Persistent psychological effects of past atrocities (massacres, raiding) continue to fuel distrust, resentment, and a culture of violence, impacting collective community psychology.
- **Commercialization of Cattle Raiding:** Organized criminal groups exploit weak state presence, changing traditional raiding into a commercial initiative. This makes it more violent and often difficult to resolve.

Exclusion and persistent Gender Inequality:

- **Exclusion of Women, Girls.** These groups disproportionately suffer the effects of violence and insecurity and resource scarcity, yet they remain largely left out from decision-making processes in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and resource management.
- **Inadequate Representation:** Their voices and unique perspectives remain neglected from formal and informal peace structures, regardless of their critical roles in community resilience and early warning responses.
- **Exclusion of youth and PWDs:** Youth are the future leaders with the capacity to positively transform the society. Their inclusion in peace

processes is very critical since they bring in unique and diverse perspectives for example, the use of digital platforms for promoting peace.

Key Recommendations: Call to Action for different Actors

Addressing the multifaceted challenges in the Karamoja Cluster requires concerted, multi-sectoral, and inclusive effort from key partners.

Call for National Governments (Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan):

- **Strengthen Security and Governance:**
 - *There is need to enhance strong state presence, improve physical infrastructure (roads, communication networks), and equip security forces in borderland areas.*
 - *Implement joint cross-border security operations, controlled disarmament programs, and strengthen law enforcement capacities to counter commercialized cattle raiding and SALW proliferation. Establish accessible and trustworthy justice systems.*
- **Harmonize Policies and Legal Frameworks:**
 - *Review and align national policies related to transhumance, land use, and resource management to support peacebuilding and cross-border cooperation.*
 - *Operationalize existing cross-border agreements (e.g., Kenya-Uganda 2019 programme) by allocating sufficient resources and establishing clear implementation frameworks.*
- **Promote Transitional Justice and Psychosocial Support:**
 - *Acknowledge and address the historical injustices and psychological trauma from past atrocities.*
 - *Develop national and localized transitional justice mechanisms, support community-based psycho-social healing initiatives, and incorporate conflict-sensitive approaches in all development programming.*

Call for Regional Bodies (e.g., IGAD, EAC):

- Enhance Cross-Border Coordination and Policy Harmonization:
 - *Facilitate and strengthen a unified regional approach to peacebuilding in the Karamoja Cluster. This can be achieved by*
 - *Establish and resource for joint cross-border peace platforms that bring together national authorities, CSOs, and traditional leaders.*
 - *Develop region-wide strategies for climate change adaptation, managing shared resources, and controlling SALW flows.*
- Invest in Regional Infrastructure and Economic Integration:
 - *Support initiatives that foster economic interdependence and shared prosperity across borders by prioritizing investment in cross-border infrastructure (roads, markets, communication).*
 - *Facilitate regional trade policies that benefit pastoralist communities, and reduce reliance on raiding.*

Call for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) & Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs):

- Strengthen Local Peace Mechanisms and Coordination:
 - *Support and enhance the capacity of traditional and informal peace structures (elders, women, youth groups, FBOs) while integrating them into broader peace architectures.*
 - *Facilitate platforms for local actors to coordinate their efforts and share their experiences, or best practices, and collaborate with formal state structures in addition to providing training in conflict mediation, peace education, and evidence documentation.*
- Advocate for Inclusivity and Empowerment:
 - *Ensure the significant and deliberate inclusion of women, girls, youth, and PWDs in all peacebuilding and decision-making processes.*
 - *Develop targeted programs to empower women and youth as peace agents by, creating safe spaces for their participation, and supporting their leadership roles in conflict prevention and resolution.*
 - *Advocate to donors for funding on climate, justice, resilience and adaptive capacity for communities affected by the*

effects of climate change in the region.

Call for Donors & International Partners:

- Invest in Evidence-Based and well-Coordinated Programming:
 - *There is need for paradigm shift towards funding mechanisms that prioritize integrated, multi-sectoral peacebuilding approaches with emphasis on coordination among implementing partners.*
 - *Support the establishment of robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks to document the impact of peace initiatives on social cohesion. Fund research and dissemination efforts (like this study) to inform policy and practice.*
- Commit to Long-Term and Flexible Financing:
 - *Categorize the protracted nature of conflict in the Karamoja Cluster and offer long-term, flexible funding that can adjust to the dynamic contexts.*
 - *Prioritize investments in climate adaptive and resilience capacity, sustainable livelihoods, and psychosocial support alongside security and governance initiatives, ensuring a holistic approach to peacebuilding.*

Call for the Salama Hub Africa

- Empower women and youth peace initiatives across the cluster (e.g strengthen POTUMA peace initiative; cultural exchange programs).
- Conference and seminars to enhance NGO and CSOs coordination and collaboration to overcome service duplication across the cluster.
- Education and training to capacity build the community (women, youth, and men).
- Leverage on existing traditional conflict resolution mechanisms (cultural conflict resolution mechanisms).
- Interventions like psychosocial support to overcome historical injustice to be integrated into training programs).
- Leverage on existing institutions of higher learning in the cluster in promoting social cohesion.
- Interventions like agro-pastoralism to enhance a paradigm shift from pastoralism.

Conclusion

The Karamoja Cluster, regarded as volatile with persistent cycle of conflict, worsened by climate change, weak governance, and historical grievances, requires speedy and planned action. By addressing the root causes of conflict, strengthening governance, building climate resilience, and empowering women and youth in addition to PWDs, the Karamoja Cluster can transition from a region of vulnerability to one of sustained peace and social cohesion. Sustainable peace requires moving beyond fragmented efforts towards a well concerted, coordinated, and inclusive peace architecture.

This policy brief notes that recognizing, integrating, and adequately financing important grassroots actors, coordinating cross-border governance in security and natural resource management with a focus on inclusion and restorative justice, individual governments with strong support from regional bodies (IGAD), can successfully address structural and psychological causes and triggers of violence. Formal institutionalization and corridor-specific action across these four policy pillars is the key to unlocking the full potential of local peacebuilding, fostering long-term resilience, and ensuring prosperity and social cohesion across the Karamoja Cluster.

This requires collective commitment and coordinated action of the community, national governments, regional bodies, civil society, Faith-based organizations and international partners.

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About the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) promotes a world free of violence, inequality, and oppression. Guided by the Quaker belief in the divine light within each person, we nurture the seeds of change and respect for human life to fundamentally transform our societies and institutions. We work with people and partners worldwide of all faiths and backgrounds to meet urgent community needs, challenge injustice, and build peace. Through its Africa Regional Office in Kenya, AFSC promotes projects in Kenya, South Sudan, Somalia, Burundi, and Zimbabwe, with an evidence-based advocacy component for policy change in the Horn of Africa, with an office in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. AFSC has decades of experience leading advocacy, evidence-based research, and worldwide civil society strengthening programs. AFSC brings Global South leaders and Civil Society Organizations through the Dialogue and Exchange Program to learn and exchange ideas every year. Due to the challenging situation in the Horn of Africa, AFSC focused intensely on this region to link up with existing civil society networks and Faith Leaders to contribute with its specific expertise.

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About the All Africa Conference of Churches, AACC:

AACC (All Africa Conference of Churches) is a continental ecumenical body that accounts for over 200 million Christians across the African continent. AACC is the largest association of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, and Indigenous churches in Africa, and a member of the worldwide ecumenical network. As an ecumenical body, AACC is a fellowship of 214 members comprising Churches, National Christian Councils (NCCs), theological and lay training institutions, and other Christian organizations in 43 African countries. With eleven programmatic focus areas, AACC's current strategy ensures that churches and other Christian institutions in Africa significantly contribute to the realization of the Continental and Global sustainable development agendas, such as the 17 SDGs and the AU Agenda 2065: "The Africa We Want."

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