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75%

THE NEED. Percentage dropout rate of girls in northern Karamoja region, compared to boys' 56 per cent.

LOCAL INVOLVEMENT. The involvement of local leaders from northern Karamoja to sensitise locals on the advantages of attaining an education stems back to a Declaration made at Pope John Paul II Memorial Hall, Kaabong district, on July 27, 2017.



Karamoja Education Declaration. On May 30, 2019, community leaders in northern Karamoja gathered in Kaabong District to launch a Declaration to improve education in the region. **Esther Oluka** explores the state of education in the region the need for this Declaration.



Vow. Local leaders in northern Karamoja sign the Karamoja Education Declaration on May 30, 2019. The Declaration is a commitment to send more children to school. PHOTOS BY ESTER OLUKA.

Committing to educate more children in northern Karamoja

Joseph Lokwang, now aged 35 years, has one regret in life so far. A resident of Lolelia Sub County in Kaabong district, Lokwang regrets never getting any education during his childhood.

"At the time, I thought learning was useless, something people did to pass time. I preferred grazing to going to school. Whenever I saw my agetates walking long distances for classes, I laughed hard at them," recounts Lokwang, through an interpreter as he does not speak English.

The youngest of three children, Lokwang's 40-year-old sister and 32-year-old brother never benefited from education either. "My sister was married off at 10 years old so my parents could get dowry. My brother, like me, refused to go to school." It did not help matters that their parents did not mind their sons staying home. "They are illiterate themselves, probably why they did not see the importance of emphasizing that we get an education," says Lokwang.

At 25 years of age, Lokwang, an adept herdsman by then, left home and started his own family. A father of two boys today, his lack of education has caught up with him. "I have failed to get any job within the community because of lack of academic qualifications. Just the other day, I asked to be an office messenger. I was, however, asked for a Primary Leaving Certificate (PLE) which I don't have. I almost cried," he shares.

Regret notwithstanding, Lokwang has learnt from his experience: He is making sure his own two sons get an education. "I don't want them to suffer my same fate," he explains.

The state of education in Karamoja

Lokwang exemplifies a significant number of adults from Karamoja region who have never been to school. This community also continues to register poor enrollment numbers, showing Lokwang's history of children not attending school repeat itself. Many children are, for different reasons, not going to school as well.

A 2018 United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) report titled *Population Matters: Leaving no one behind in Karamoja*, notes that the overall literacy rate for Karamoja stands at 25 per cent while in Kampala it is 94 per cent. Over 70 per cent of the population older than 10 years in Karamoja has never been to

school, of whom the majority are women.

An education crusade

This backdrop is part of what informed leaders from northern Karamoja to embark on a massive crusade to educate both parents and children, on the importance of education. The involvement of leaders in this crusade stems back to a July 27, 2017 Declaration made at Pope John Paul II Memorial Hall, Kaabong District. The participants were leaders and stakeholders of Abim, Kaabong and Kotido districts together with the state Minister for Ethics and Integrity, Members of Parliament (MPs) from the region, respective Resident District Commissioners (RDCs), Local Council Chair persons, District Education Officers of said districts, among other stakeholders.

The July 2017 Declaration meeting was chaired by Rosemary Nansubuga Seninde, the State Minister for Primary Education, coordinated by Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA). ADRA was also assigned the task of including local leaders in drafting and signing the declaration in 2018, as part of the road map towards improving the education system.

On Thursday, May 30, 2019, stakeholders converged again at Kaabong Secondary School grounds in Kaabong District for the launch of the Karamoja Education Declaration. "We are here to agree on how we are going to operationalise it (the Declaration)," explained Solomon Kateregga, the director of programs, ADRA - Uganda.

During her speech, Seninde asserted that Karamoja would never develop if children were not taken to school.

"Things are different today. The world has changed. Time has come for the people in Karamoja to wake up," she said, adding, "Even for parents who are complaining that there are no teachers, well, that should not be an excuse. You can still take

VOICES



"Parents think of education as a long term investment for which they do not want to wait.

We have also come to realise that some of the authorities are forcing children to go to school without educating their own, hence sabotaging the process.

All in all, more sensitisation needs to be done,"

ANTONINA NABUDUWA, HEAD TEACHER, KOMUKUNY GIRLS PRIMARY SCHOOL, KAABONG DISTRICT.



"I believe that school officials especially need to go out into the communities and find ways of tactfully luring more children into school. For example, they can hire sound systems and speakers and then move through communities encouraging children to come back to school and children will be attracted to go back to school,"

RICHARD ABIA, TEACHER, KOMUKUNY GIRLS' PRIMARY SCHOOL, KAABONG DISTRICT.

KARAMOJA EDUCATION DECLARATION

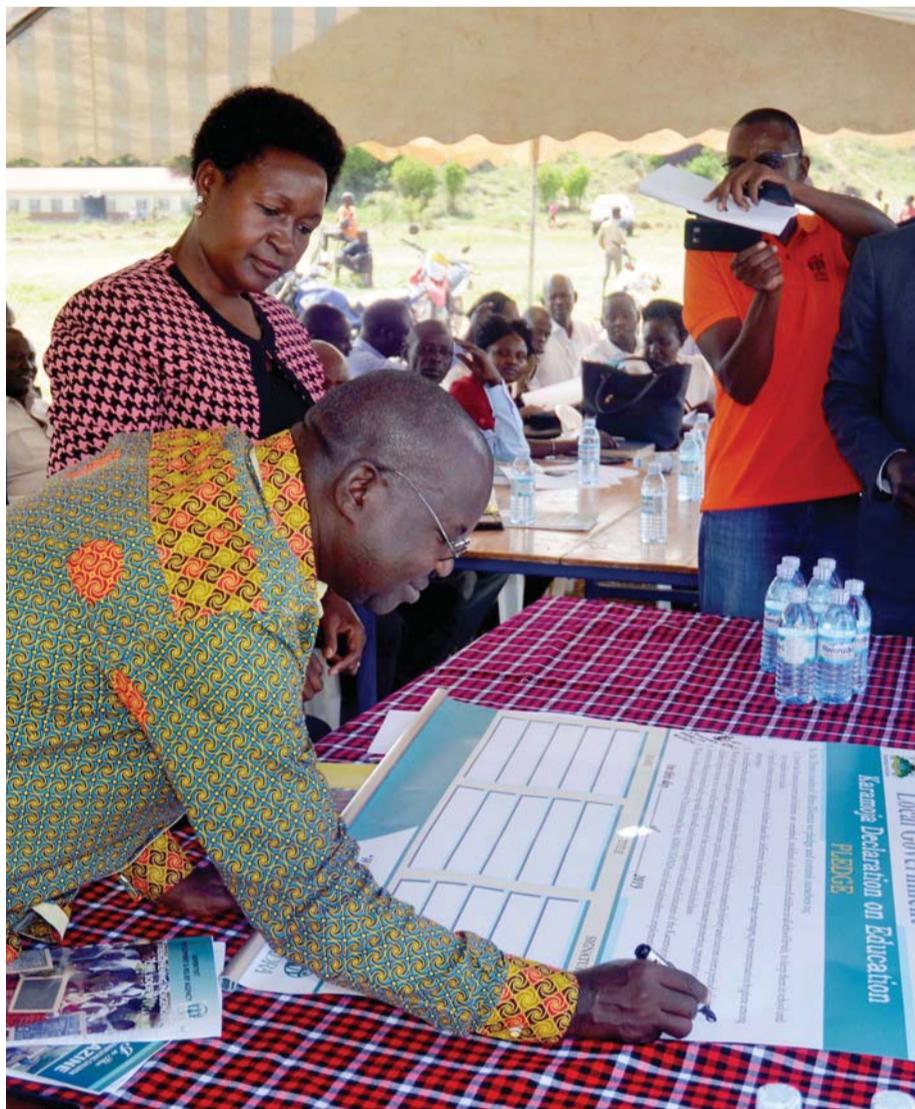
What. The Declaration is a deliberate campaign mandating local leaders and other stakeholders to get more children in northern Karamoja to school.



BETTER. Rose Okori, inspector of schools, Abim District, says most parents in Abim are starting to embrace education, and enrollment rates are increasing. Last year saw 34,000 children in class and this year about 36,000. There are also 52 primary schools compared to last year's 48, including government-aided, community based and private owned schools.



The poverty situation in Karamoja means we may not be able to meet the education demands. We have been appealing to the president for more science teachers and scholarships, at least 100 university scholarships for the region each year. **FR SIMON LOKODO, MINISTER OF ETHICS AND INTEGRITY, AND SERVING MP, DODOTH WEST COUNTY - KARAMOJA.**



Commitment. Fr Simon Lokodo and Rosemary Seninde sign the Karamoja Education Declaration.



Cordinators. Solomon Kateregga is the Director of Programs, Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), the coordinators of the Declaration.

these children to school so that they can at least associate with peers and learn from each other."

The State Minister also emphasised that children should be enrolled in school to avoid future regrets. "When you are a child, you never feel the pain of not going to school. The pain surfaces when you have grown up and see your agemates succeeding and leaving you behind because you lack the required academic papers," she said, concluding with a request to local leaders to follow up and implement the declaration.

Enrollments and dropout rates

Figures from Kaabong District local government's department of education and sports show that the current school dropout rate in the district is at 70 per cent. Cited reasons for this include domestic chores, early child marriage, and negative attitude towards education, among others.

Richard Wambi, the deputy chief administrative officer, Kotido District local government, says the enrollment in Kotido is around 4,000 pupils on average out of the expected 11,000. He says the dropout rate for girls is 75 per cent while for boys, it is 56 per cent.

The situation in Abim District seems more hopeful than that in Kaabong and Kotido. Rose Okori, inspector of schools, Abim District, says most parents are starting to embrace education. "Every

ST LUKE LOMODOCH PRIMARY SCHOOL ENROLLMENT 2019			
CLASS	BOYS	GIRLS	TOTAL
P.1	327	154	481
P.2	169	73	242
P.3	98	43	141
P.4	52	18	70
P.5	50	14	64
P.6	58	18	76
P.7	50	10	60
TOTAL	804	335	1,139

Francis Lele, a teacher, refers to St Luke Lomodoch's admission ratios per class.

RATIOS

Girl-child education.

In Lomodoch Primary School, Lolelia Sub County, Kaabong district, records show that in first term, 804 boys enrolled while 335 girls enrolled. The 2016 Education Ministry Statistical Abstract report indicates that only 43.6 per cent of girls are enrolled in primary school in the Karamoja sub region. Francis Lele, a teacher at the school says it is probably because parents prefer marrying off girls at a younger age while preferably educating the boys. "They value bride price more than education," he says.

Whenever the school gets information that a parent is planning on marrying off their daughter, Lele says the school administration intervenes to try and help the child. "We normally sit down with the parent and give them examples of women in this country who have attained an education and are now holding bigger offices," he says. With this, Lele says they are changing the parents' mentality and perception.



In session. Primary Seven pupils in class at St Luke Lomodoch Primary School.



Proud. Pupils of Lomodoch Primary School pose for a picture near the school's sign post. Some teachers here suggested school authorities going out to lure children to school.

year, I see the enrollment rates increasing. Take last year, for example, we had about 34,000 children in class and this year, the number has already grown to about 36,000. The number of schools has also increased from 48 to 52 primary schools including government-aided, community based and private owned schools," she says.

According to Okori, there are also about 49 Early Child Development Centers (ECDs) in Abim district. The problem remains that enrollment numbers at this stage are still low. "We have over 14,000 children in the district aged three and five years but only about 2,000 are enrolled," she says.

These figures, based on three districts of Kaabong, Kotido and Abim, indicate both low school enrollment levels and high dropout rates. Some of the reasons highlighted for such outcomes include people migrating to resettle back in their original lands and in due process, relocating with their children.

There are also cases of child labour where children are involved in petty businesses to earn money to meet the basic needs of their families, owing to the dire poverty in the region. Another hindrance is the long distances to school, which means children are usually too exhausted to concentrate in class. Girls are specifically affected by early marriages and inability to afford menstrual sanitation for monthly periods.

Luring children to school

The stakeholders' mandate per the Declaration is to come up with ways to get more children to school. In Kotido, a law addressing community practices hindering school enrollment and retention of pupils has been made by the district council. This law highlights that it will be a crime within the context of Kotido to find a child of school going age not attending classes during school days. Their parents or guardians will be held responsible and prosecuted in the courts of law, accordingly.

The law also deems it a crime for parents not to provide scholastic materials and meals for their children while they study. A parents committee has been put in place to enforce this. "Our intention is to see that children study and concentrate well with minimal interruptions, hence this initiative," says Wambi.

Other interventions include community sensitisation drives about education, spearheaded by local leaders through community meetings and other forums. "We also communicate through radio talk shows highlighting benefits of attaining an education," shares Okori.

Leaders are also urging parents whose children dropped out to take them back to school, for a second chance at an education.

This article has been sponsored by Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) - Uganda.