

Karamoja wakes up to a new dawn, embraces education

By Geoffrey Mutegeki

Peter Apule recalls the day his father almost killed him for joining school and not staying home to look after his father's cattle.

On the fateful day Apule's father armed with a spear descended on the school threatening everyone and ordered the boy out of class.

"The whole class scattered; he grabbed and dragged me home and that was my first and last day at school," Apule recalls.

Now aged 72, Apule, a resident of Loler-Ekia village in Nadunget sub-county in Moroto district still regrets not acquiring formal education.

"I would have studied up to university if my father had not got me out of school," Apule says.

He says many people in his generation never went to school because their parents did not value education. This was because their wealth was measured in the number of cattle one had. This partly explains the high illiteracy rates in Karamoja region compared to other parts of the country.

According to Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), only 25% of the population in Karamoja are literate compared to a national average of 74%. Poverty levels in Karamoja stand at 61% compared to the national rate of 27%.

"Education for long in Karamoja was perceived negatively," he says.

The gross enrolment ratio in primary schools is only 58% (66% for boys and 49% for girls), compared to 109% (107 for boys and 111% for girls) at the national level.

At the secondary education level, the gross enrolment rate is only 7% compared to 25% at the national level.

The Karimojong rejected education during the colonial days and to the effect, the elders buried a pen in the 1950s in Kotido district as a symbol of rejecting education.

During those days anyone who would let their children join school would be banished by the elders and declared an enemy. However, this has since changed with elders



ABEK facilitators discussing how to use newspapers in education. Elders in the region are ready to support learning programmes in ABEK centres to have their children's education improved

joining the crusade to take children to school.

Although Apule did not go to school, he is in support of promoting education in Karamoja. He is the chairperson of Loler-Ekia Alternative Basic Education for Karamoja (ABEK) learning centre in Moroto district.

"My son went to school and he constructed a permanent house in the village. Many young people have houses and are driving cars because they went to school," he says.

As an ABEK centre chairperson, Apule is accountable for the learning of over 100 children.

He says although his father might not have known the value of education, he does and that is why he supports children getting educated.

There are over 70 ABEK centres in Moroto district with several students transiting to formal education.

In addition, interventions such as scholarships by the Government and various organisations such as Save the Children Uganda and *New Vision* newspaper have also been put in place to help improve the quality of education in the region.

Activities to support education

A couple of weeks ago, *New Vision* staff were in Karamoja training chairpersons of the Village ABEK committees (VAC) to support the monitoring of the Newspapers in Education (NiE) programme as a strategy to improve learning achievements in the region.

The programme, which is being implemented in conjunction with Save the Children, encourages the use of newspapers as a teaching tool to deliver the curriculum.

The training held at Nadunget sub-county headquarters in Moroto also attracted ABEK learning centre facilitators and monitoring assistants, LC3 chairpersons, sub-county chiefs and LC3 secretaries for education.

In a three-year study of NiE in

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who read newspapers showed significantly superior spelling and vocabulary skills and had superior understanding of social issues to their counterparts who did not read newspapers.

In another six-week newspaper reading programme with 13-year-old American students, the performance of two-thirds of the 743 students with reading problems improved by more than a grade. Ten students gained two years and two children gained over three years.

Through the NiE programme, the ABEK learning centres receive newspapers every Wednesday of the school term to be used by ABEK facilitators as instructional materials.

During the training, the VAC chairpersons committed to ensure that the newspapers that are supplied in schools are put to good use by both the pupils and facilitators.

"I have tasted the fruit of a pen and I know why it is important to educate children," Angella Topoth 65, whose husband was a headmaster, said.

Topoth is the chairperson Kadilakeny ABEK centre and supports the use of newspapers as teaching materials in her centre.

John Eremu, the *New Vision* features editor expressed delight that the elders in Karamoja, especially those heading ABEK schools are in support of education and the use of newspapers.

"I am happy that you support

ABEK SUCCESS

ABEK providing basic education to children in Karamoja. It supplements the formal education system and is adapted to the pastoralist community needs in terms of the curriculum content, school hours and selection of teachers suitable for the way of life of the Karimojong.

- ABEK has enabled over 30,000 children in the Karamoja region to access education. Over 2,000 of these have joined formal schools. Many have graduated from universities and got formal employment.

- Its management and administrative structures is at village, sub-county, district and regional levels and among grassroots communities and the parents.

- ABEK community-based facilitators are periodically trained to ensure quality and effectiveness

- ABEK has increased awareness and demand for education in the region

- It has improved sanitation and hygiene among the children, parents and community members



An elder discussing during the training of ABEK facilitators in Nadunget sub-county headquarters in Moroto. Photos by Geoffrey Mutegeki

children to stay in school. Let everyone continue playing their role to have the best education for our children despite the challenges faced," Eremu said.

He called on the chairpersons to task teachers with ensuring that children remain in school and the newspapers are used well.

"A child who has been to school for one day is better than someone who has never gone there. Such a child's thinking is different and is always ready to learn new things," Eremu said.

Jovita Ajuna, the media in education advocacy manager, urged parents and teachers to read with their children and interest them in learning.

"Read with the children whenever you have the time. Cut out some of the articles and interest the children in reading them," Ajuna said.

Raphael Lolem, the Nadunget LC3 chairperson, who is also a former ABEK facilitator, commended *New*

facilitating the ABEK centres.

"ABEK facilitators are doing good work. But there are a few who are not doing anything. We are going to do away with those who are not performing because we do not want to lose this support," Lolem said.

The use of newspapers in the classroom instills lifelong skills such as critical thinking, creativity, writing, confidence and public speech to both teachers and children.

NiE is a programme started in 2001 in the *New Vision* as an activity to improve literacy in primary and secondary schools.

ABEK is a non-formal education that targets children aged between six and 18 years.

The programme is designed to provide basic education to children in pastoral communities whose way of life limits their access to formal education.

Since its inception it has made education accessible because the school follows the herdsmen to the

FRUITFUL RESULTS ✓

Through the Adopt-a-School project, *New Vision* did an NiE research in four rural schools; Osokotoi Primary School in Serere district, Punoluru Primary School in Lira district, Katebe Primary School in Mbarara district and St Francis Nyenga Boys in Bulkwe district. After four years of implementation all the adopted schools which had not had a single pupil pass their Primary Leaving Exams (PLE) in first grade for 10 years, registered great improvement. Osokotoi was the best performing school in Serere in 2016 PLE and all the other schools now have some pupils passing in the first grade.