



KARAMOJA WOMEN
UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION



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Organisation Uganda



Youth and communities lead innovations to protect children in Karamoja

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CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Consultant's Methodology	3
A Review of Partner Models in the Inception Period	4
Children and Youth Resilient Initiative for Localized Development	4
Karamoja Women Umbrella Organization	12
Straight Talk Foundation	20
African Youth Alliance Development Organisation	26
Nascent Research and Development Organisation	32
Grassroots Alliance for Rural Development	37

INTRODUCTION

Karamoja sub-region faces several child exploitation problems triggered by food insecurity, social norms and higher levels of poverty than the national average. The rate of child marriage in the region is more than double the national average (2024 national census), and this is matched by a high rate of teenage pregnancy. Early marriage of girls is closely linked with poverty and school dropout, as well as being driven by cultural practices of cattle wealth acquisition through bride price payments as well as parental anxieties about teenage pregnancy. Child marriage in Karamoja also has an impact on boys: In order to get married, adolescent boys drop out of school early to earn income and, in some cases, to acquire cattle to pay bride price.

Insufficient economic activities, partially a result of low enrolment levels in school, coupled with limited agricultural opportunities and climate disruption, lead to risky youth migration and child trafficking to cities in Uganda as well as in neighbouring countries. The Global Fund to End Modern Slavery estimates that 90% of children living on the streets in the capital, Kampala, are Karamojong. Children that do not migrate to larger cities are sometimes sent locally to gold mines and marble quarries as cheap labour to earn a meagre income for their families. Many of these children are sexually exploited and face physical violence.

A community-based strategy to address child exploitation

The Freedom Fund is supporting a program alongside community-based organisations that have been operating in the subregion to address child and forced marriage as well as other forms of child exploitation. During the one-year inception period 2024/2025, the fund identified six partner organisations operating in Moroto and Napak districts to test a range of models that would address child marriage, child labour and trafficking in the sub-region. Based on the feasibility of interventions and availability of funding, the Freedom Fund is considering support for a longer-term hotspot program in Karamoja.

During the inception period, the local partners and field staff tested a range of models to determine the most viable interventions for the long-term hotspot strategy.

Partner organisations have identified the following entry points for change in communities:

- Economic strengthening initiatives
- Engaging clan elders to support protective values
- Promoting dialogue and positive parenting within families
- Collectivizing adolescent girls and adolescent boys

Partners' operating framework

All partner organisation approaches are guided by several key principles, including:

- A gender transformative approach that identifies, analyses and seeks to change gender roles that lead to child exploitation.
- Community-led interventions that are generated and implemented by survivors and their families, communities and local leaders, including male-focused engagement.
- Collaboration with government agencies, civil society, and other officials who provide protective and legal services, skilling, education and economic empowerment to survivors, parents and children at risk of exploitation. The partner activities and strategies are guided within the framework of Uganda's National Strategy to End Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy 2022/2023 – 2026/2027.

CONSULTANT'S METHODOLOGY

Field-based in-person discussions were held with senior management teams and field staff of the six partner organisations in Moroto and Napak Districts, complemented by participant observation and key informant interviews.

The consultant audio-recorded interviews and captured photography after receiving informed, signed consent from all those providing information and participating in focus group discussions.

The models are described in both narrative and visual format to support clear understanding of how they were implemented in the communities.

List of partners interviewed



Children and Youth Resilient Initiative for Localized Development



Karamoja Women Umbrella Organization



Straight Talk Foundation



African Youth Alliance Development Organisation



Nascent Research and Development Organisation



Grassroots Alliance for Rural Development

A REVIEW OF PARTNER MODELS IN THE INCEPTION PERIOD

Children and Youth Resilient Initiative for Localized Development

Youth theatre promotes behaviour change

The problem

In Moroto municipality and rural Katiekile sub-county in Moroto District, Karamoja, Children and Youth Resilient Initiative for Localized Development (CYRILD, formerly RRCESD) identified multiple cases of child labour at gold mines and quarries, with no support for children that were injured or assaulted at the sites. These children were often sent to the mines by their families to supplement the family income, and in some instances the whole family may work at the mine.

On-going community dialogues with local authorities and community members revealed that low education levels, limited economic opportunities and low agricultural productivity are key triggers for poverty, encouraging this form of child exploitation. Child labour is also seen by community members as a rite of passage that prepares them for family survival, with girls predominantly selected for labour, rather than education.

The youth theatre model

The theatre model is based on evidence of previous success using it in the sub-region. Community theatre mirrors the traditional practice of storytelling by elders to convey teachings, messages and cultural wisdom.



Campaigns and theatre performances create memorable experiences that remain with audiences long after the event, enhancing the likelihood of behaviour change and inspiring ongoing community discussions.

Project staff

Given the sensitive nature of child labour and its integration in local customs, CYRILD uses theatre as a non-confrontational platform to create awareness about the triggers and dangers of child exploitation and to stimulate critical reflection and open dialogue for community-led solutions.

How the model works

Identification and recruitment of youth for theatre performance training

Selection of participants is primarily based on their exposure to exploitation – the youth selected by CYRILD are all survivors of child exploitation from the mining areas of Katiekile sub-county. Most of them have dropped out of school and many are young fathers and mothers. The goal is to provide a platform for survivors to share their experiences with those most at risk and create awareness based on their lived experiences. Parental consent is obtained prior to involvement in the theatre activities. The participants are segmented by age – youth (18-30 years) and a younger group of children (10-17 years). This segmentation enables trainers to tailor activities and messages according to their age specific needs and their ability to articulate key child protection issues.

Youth actors trained by CYRILD act out a scenario of reporting child exploitation to local authorities.
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Training in traditional theatre

To ensure regular attendance and engagement, trainings are conducted on weekends in CYRILD office or other accessible community spaces, providing a safe space and flexibility for the children and youth to participate without disrupting their daily routines.

The training sessions are facilitated by a drama expert and by CYRILD staff who have knowledge of traditional theatre techniques which include Physical Theatre and Movement using body language and physical expressions to convey messages and emotions effectively; Script Analysis where participants are taught to interpret and perform scripts, enabling them to understand and communicate stories convincingly; and Emotion Memory where performers are encouraged to draw from personal emotional experiences to provide authenticity and depth to their performances.

Youth are trained in effective oral communication and confidence in public speaking during community discussions. To support this, they learn about the key forms of child exploitation, causes, and how to effectively report incidents to law enforcement and community leaders. During their rehearsals, the youth discuss issues around child exploitation, selecting the key topic and determining how they will act it out.

Through the trainings, the youth groups are then able to develop their own theatrical performance scripts based on the child protection knowledge received and their own experiences. CYRILD and the Lia drama group have trained 70 youths (25 males and 45 females) in theatre techniques, incorporating oral traditions and cultural values. Naming the group after Lia (the location where they are based) creates a strong community identity around the initiative.

Lia means river in the Tepeth language, one of the languages spoken by one of the minority marginalised tribes in Karamoja sub region. The Lia river flows from the hills of Mount Moroto where marble stone mining activity is common. We chose this name because it directly relates to the seasonal river in the area where children who go to play and bathe at the marble mining site where quarrying happens. Children are selected because you can pay them cheaply to mine and load marble stones on the big trucks.

Participant

Mobile theatre community performances

The performances are held regularly in the community, targeting different parishes and villages to amplify the reach of messages. The frequency of performances improves the youths' experience and confidence in delivering theatrical performances, with six performances held in the first year. Using storytelling, music, and dance in the local language, the youth performers wear cultural costumes and act out stories that narrate child exploitation scenarios, the problems arising, the reporting pathway and actors involved in addressing such incidents and providing relevant services for survivors. These relatable scenarios endear youth performers to the audiences, creating powerful emotional connections that spark community reflection on the key issues raised in the drama.

These dramas empower survivors by giving them a voice, foster empathy in the community, and engage potential perpetrators in behaviour change avenues.

Community leader

Community dialogues and action plans

Each theatrical performance is followed by an open community dialogue to discuss the child exploitation issues observed. The youth, together with community caregivers, parents, cultural leaders and local councillors then collectively devise sustainable, practical action plans to address child exploitation.

Youth actors trained by CYRILD and the Lia Drama group in Moroto.
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Promising gains

Community-led action through increased knowledge and awareness

Theatre is emerging as a useful strategy for community engagement, knowledge building around child protection, accountability and united action for children. The opportunity to reflect and have dialogue after the performance has led to the development of community action plans that detail responsibilities for all stakeholders. Key examples of community actions stemming from the dialogues include:

- All local councils ensuring children are in school and not at the mining sites, with school registers checked regularly to confirm children's attendance.
- Bylaws that prohibit children at mining sites with negligent parents being taken to the district labour officer and the police child protection unit for caution against future infringements.
- Formation of the No Child in Mining Sites committee comprising parents, youth survivors and community leaders to ensure children are not at sites. The committee convenes twice weekly visits to monitor and enforce the ban.
- Lobbying for resources from other civil society partners to ensure sub-county child protection committees hold quarterly meetings to review progress and address challenges of child exploitation.

Theatre also stimulated thinking about the status quo and gave communities a platform to become curious and interrogate other unanswered concerns about child exploitation, leading to stepped up and continuous action to address emerging issues.

Questions asked by the community after youth theatrical performances demonstrating heightened interest in child protection issues:

- What plans does the government have for children who are exploited due to their vulnerability?
- How can we identify if a child is being exploited or abused?
- What legal actions can be taken if someone suspects a child is being exploited?
- How can community members protect children from exploitation?
- Where can victims or witnesses seek help or report abuse?
- What roles do parents and caregivers play in preventing child exploitation?
- What are the consequences for those who exploit children?
- How can schools and teachers help prevent child exploitation?

Community leaders and local government authorities answer these questions on the spot and these questions are documented by the theatre group to form the script and content of future performances. This demonstrates the power of local theatre to support continuous knowledge-building and the likelihood of adoption of better child protection practices.

In numbers



School enrolment at Lia Primary increased
from 783 children in 2024, to 822 children in 2025 within two school terms.



35 children withdrawn from the mines
since the theatre performances were started in the community.

Encouraging youth agency for advocacy

In a society where elders determine all family actions, theatre enables the youth to lead conversations that encourage the community towards protective actions. Through the trainings they receive knowledge about rights and responsibilities, for example understanding the referral pathway so that they can play an active role in their own protection. The drama skills and knowledge are giving them confidence to advocate for their rights.

Interviewer: *"Have you seen any change in people? How do people receive the plays? What do people say afterwards?"*

Participant: *"That's when they realize the dangers of that thing [child labour]. Then they say: 'We did not know some of these things', because we show them. Some of them understand from there and they come and consult us one on one to give them more information."*

The breadth of questions that arise from the community dialogues have built the confidence of the youth and encouraged them to persist in creating awareness through the performances. Youth have become trusted sources of knowledge and guidance on case reporting.

Participant: *"I feel good because the older people come to me to ask what they should do when they want to report. I tell them that they have to first go to LC1, then police, as starting steps."*

Interviewer: *"So, if you were to perform at the regional level, where do you want to go?"*

Participant: *"Kampala. Because child trafficking is too much in Kampala. But we can do it in any place. We know that many of our brothers and sisters have gone to Kampala so we can now teach them to come back home through the drama."*

Interviewer: *"What has changed for you since joining this group?"*

Participant: *"When I joined this [drama] group, I changed my mind about the stone quarries because I'm now aware of the disadvantage of being there. I no longer go there. I even sensitised my mother because of this. Because your parents can tell you, I have no money for you to go back to school. So, if you want to go back to school, please go and work. Our parents are now aware of the dangers; they no longer force us to go to the mines."*

Reduction in child labour and promotion of education

Given the increased interest of parents in child protection issues, children have also benefitted from new opportunities like education scholarships, as parents lobby for support, seeking alternatives to incomes from mining sites. CYRILD, for example, partnered with other civil society actors to support three vulnerable children to return to school after they left the mines.

School records at Lia Primary School show evidence of increased enrolment and retention from 783 children in 2024 to 822 children in 2025 in two school terms (Source: Lia Primary School Children register, 2024/2025) which can partially be attributed to community actions towards eliminating child labour. Other children have been trained in starting small businesses such as snack and beverage stalls and making cultural art and crafts.

Economic activity presents an opportunity to sustain the youth theatre model and strengthen youth agency around child protection while simultaneously reducing reliance on exploitative child labour. Project staff report 35 children rescued from the mines since the theatre performances were started in the community.

Complementing traditional parenting

Parents and caregivers regard the theatre training sessions as an opportunity to educate and engage children (especially those out-of-school) and restrain them from engaging in early sexual activities that can lead to teenage pregnancy which is culturally unacceptable. For example, other youth-relevant topics are discussed during the training sessions including sexual reproductive health education,

menstrual health hygiene, substance abuse and life skills for better decision-making. In this way, peer-led theatre supports traditional parenting by bridging knowledge gaps. These knowledge and awareness sessions have been praised by the local community and sub-county leadership for contributing to a reduction in early marriages and teenage pregnancies in Lia parish, based on local council reports which document child exploitation incidents.

Why the model works: Key success factors

The model has the advantage of being accessible to diverse youth in multiple ways: it does not require high literacy levels; it enrolls children up to 18 years of age and it runs during the school year and the holiday season. It is led by youth, for youth, encouraging peer-to-peer learning and advocacy. Its attraction also includes building life skills like confidence and public speaking, social networking through mobile performances in other villages, and the intrinsic value of being given the opportunity to facilitate discussions that address issues that endanger their lives. The program also partners with other service providers and nonprofit organisations to provide critical information on mental health and sexual reproductive health, topics that are not typically discussed at home.

Therefore, the theatre model serves more than skilling youth in drama; it has evolved into a safe space where youth gain knowledge and learn skills that make them feel useful and engaged. The group has attracted consistent members because of its ability to engage youth in activities that matter to them.

The theatre performances are also complemented by quarterly radio broadcasts on child exploitation, estimated to reach 100,000 people each quarter. Radio talk shows provide key messages and success stories of incidents that have been resolved. The district officials and CYRILD staff address community questions, provide updates on resolutions and reinforce knowledge on child protection.

The engagement of officials like local councillors, police officers, para-social workers, and community monitors in formal training sessions on child protection and exploitation issues delivered by the District Community Development Officer generates greater sustainability and community ownership of case management. A multi-stakeholder approach is taken in order to monitor mining sites twice weekly, identifying children engaged in mining activities, and ensuring their protection. With key actors involved, the resolution of cases of child exploitation is more efficient, which builds the confidence of the youth actors in using theatre effectively for child protection.

Challenges

The project faces several challenges:

- The lack of adequate economic or scholastic support to children who have been rescued from the mining sites can often result in relapse or discourage community efforts to prevent child labour. It is important to have a sustainable resource plan that comprehensively supports households to engage in alternative income generating activities.
- CYRILD faces difficulties in paying full time salaries for staff, limiting their availability for the youth drama groups. This constrains group growth and delivery of the theatre productions to other locations.
- There are shortages of drama kits and props, audio-visual equipment, and limited facilities for training sessions (mobile portable tents, tables, chairs), which hampers production.
- The monitoring committees at mining sites are sometimes unable to meet because logistical support is under-funded. This affects case reporting and resolution of incidents.

To bridge some of the resource gaps, the organisation is leveraging government programmes and exploring partnerships with other civil society organisations at the parish and district level, linking the survivors to skills trainings and income generating opportunities.

Conclusion

The model demonstrates the power of youth-led theatre to create awareness about child exploitation and advance child protection actions across communities. The gains under the model can be amplified by supporting the formation and resourcing of more drama groups in other sub-counties ensuring that momentum for behaviour change is sustained by continuous reinforcement of key messages and corresponding actions.

Equally, integrating more scholastic and livelihoods support in the program will keep the youth more engaged in the acting groups and eager to present a strong advocacy voice at local and national platforms, proposing practical actions to reduce child exploitation.

A survivor's journey to rescue children

Jovia Nangiro is campaigning for a District Council position in Moroto, hoping to represent her minority community, the Tepeth, commonly known as the mountain people. She is all too familiar with the gruelling labour and the hazards found at mining sites. After refusing to be married off alongside her older sisters and opting to go to school after a scholarship offer by a good Samaritan, Jovia was outcasted by her family and clan. To fend for herself, Jovia worked at mining sites for eight years, where one evening returning home, she was sexually assaulted and became pregnant.

"It was a terrible time for me because now I was completely disowned since I was pregnant out of wedlock. I had to leave school especially when the scholarship support ended. But during that time, I met many children working at the limestone quarry and I was saddened by the cruelty and hardship they suffered even after being exploited. I organised them into a group, and we made a pledge to save UGX 5,000 (USD1.4) every week. After saving for several months, we had UGX 120,000 which we used to buy plastic beads and make traditional Karamojong jewellery which we then sold during cultural events so that we could pay our school fees." When Jovia gave birth, she returned to the quarry to continue to organise the young children and support them to save their money and invest in materials for cultural outfits and other crafts."

Jovia was identified by CYRILD as a community leader to support their efforts to identify and remove children from mining sites. She visits mining sites regularly and shares her experiences with the children convincing them to join the advocacy efforts of the theatre groups. They call her mother. She is also talented in the creative arts making all the youth actor costumes and jewellery which has created opportunities for her to sell her crafts in Karamoja, Kenya and Kampala.

"These children from the mining sites are traumatised, some are orphans, others have contracted HIV, and I would like to get funding to set up a rehabilitation centre that supports them with schooling, skilling in cultural crafts and leather products. They also need mental health support because many have grown up being mistreated. I am running for the district position so I can represent their issues, because we - the Tepeth - are a minority group where our children face high levels of child labour at the mines. I have been there, I have experienced all the hardships they suffer and if we got a partner to support these young people to go to school and learn other skills, it will be a good change."



YOUTH THEATRE FOR COMMUNITY BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

ADDRESSING CHILD
EXPLOITATION IN
KARAMOJA SUB-
REGION



RECRUIT YOUTH INTO DRAMA GROUPS

Select survivors of child
exploitation and those
at risk.



SKILLING IN TRADITIONAL THEATRE

Provide training in drama
and child rights
education.



COMMUNITY AWARENESS PERFORMANCES

Youth performers act
scenarios of child exploitation,
problems arising and
how to seek help.



COMMUNITY DIALOGUES & ACTION

Performers, parents,
community leaders and
officials collectively devise
action plans to tackle
child exploitation.



*"Our parents are now aware of the dangers; they no longer push us
to go to the sandmines."*





Members of a community action group who were trained in advocacy for child exploitation with community and cultural leaders. ©Elijah Ecrú/The Freedom Fund

Karamoja Women Umbrella Organization

Amplifying youth voices scales up community action

The problem

Based on national research that highlights early and forced marriage as a major form of child exploitation in Karamoja, Karamoja Women Umbrella Organization (KAWUO) implements interventions that equip children, young women and men, local government, religious and cultural leaders to collectively reverse discriminatory social norms that lead to exploitation.

Girls are disproportionately affected by these social norms in the region, facing exclusion from decision-making and property ownership, limitation in school attendance, excessive domestic work and the responsibility for household livelihoods. These norms are a precursor to early marriage where girls are sometimes traded to secure cattle for the family.

The region is also highly affected by child trafficking into urban areas of Uganda and into Kenya. KAWUO's activities in the inception program scaled up collective action against child trafficking and child marriage by strengthening training for adolescents so they can work with local councils, cultural and community leaders to keep children in school, prevent early marriages and support survivors with skilling opportunities.

How the model works

KAWUO trained community action groups led by girls, boys and youth, that focus on interventions for child protection. It identified vulnerable youth like survivors of trafficking, teenage mothers, adolescent boys and children who have dropped out of school, to improve their child protection knowledge and advocacy skills for child rights. The groups were trained to engage in peer-to-peer knowledge-building around child protection, transfer this knowledge to communities and facilitate dialogue for actions to address incidents of exploitation. Together, boys and girls conduct education campaigns addressing the dangers of child trafficking, child marriage, child labour and discriminatory gender norms.

In Moroto District, one such group comprises 90 female and male champions, aged 15-24 years, who support other girls and boys to participate in community actions to protect children. A mixed group of in-school and out-of-school members, teenage parents and small business owners, they meet regularly to discuss key child protection issues, plan awareness-creation activities, propose ideas for equal opportunities for girls and boys in education, and connect members to skilling opportunities and government programmes for economic access.

In our group we have enrolled parasocial workers, volunteer case managers, male champions and even politicians. It is a multi-skilled group which can support at any part of the referral pathway. The boy champions no longer encourage their young sisters to get married early. We have become well-known and everyone refers to it as the support group in the community for problems concerning children.

Participant



Community action group leader explains to members how to address cases of child exploitation.
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Given the patriarchal nature of the subregion and male dominance in decision-making, KAWUO trained boys including through working with male-only groups to mentor them on gender violence and child protection topics like child trafficking, to be able to challenge social discriminatory gender norms. This is strengthening adolescent boys' voices and their advocacy efforts around harmful effects of exploitation. The boys are being connected with other KAWUO-supported youth groups to build their confidence to collectively advocate for positive change within their communities. Trained youth groups are also critical for reaching their peers with knowledge and skills, enlisting more advocates to protect children from trafficking, forced labour and early marriage. Training of these local youth advocates primes them to discuss issues within their communities.

This regular mentorship by men elicits positive responses from boys and has been reported to encourage mindset change about girls' rights and equality. Drama and creative arts are used as platforms to promote positive masculinity, respect, and equality especially in their public events. KAWUO sensitised other previously formed groups on their roles and responsibilities in ending child marriage and trafficking. These groups are now ready to play a critical role in community awareness building through storytelling and through using structured discussion guides with key messages and activities, role playing, as well as games that transfer knowledge in participatory ways and encourage critical thinking about discriminatory norms.

Engagement of cultural leaders for social norms change

Respected elders from local communities are identified and invited to meetings alongside parents, and the youth. The meetings begin with traditional rituals led by the most senior elder, offering blessings and prayers. Introductions are made to acknowledge the presence and legitimacy of all participants. KAWUO staff then present the purpose of the meeting, for example, addressing the dangers of child trafficking and child marriage and their impact on the life of a girl child.

The agenda is set and agreed upon, often starting with sensitive topics such as child trafficking, through questions like "How do we strengthen our homesteads to avoid children from being exploited?"

Elders share their reflections, recount traditions, past practices, and cultural perspectives on the issue at hand. Government and local leaders may present legal frameworks that prohibit child trafficking and child marriage.

During open discussions, elders are given the first opportunity to speak, beginning with the most senior and proceeding in order of rank. They respectfully challenge and support each other, using proverbs, stories, and past experiences to make their points.

Once consensus is reached, the senior elder announces the decision—for example, "From today, no man should marry a girl before she finishes school" or "From today, no child should be given out by parents to other communities."

Action points are then outlined for follow-up, and responsibilities are assigned to specific elders. The meeting concludes with a formal adjournment and blessings from the senior elder.

Behaviour change communication materials like posters have been displayed at community centres, markets, health centres, and local government institutions to reinforce messaging for child protection. Following the KAWUO refresher trainings, the youth have taken the lead in facilitating community dialogues with elders.

In the sensitisation meetings with KAWUO, the groups commit to specific response actions when child exploitation occurs. They have become community monitors tracking incidents and supporting the enforcement of community resolutions around trafficking and early marriage. For example, when youth activists hear about cases, they jointly follow up with parents, community leaders, the police, and other officials, as needed.



Youth group discusses cases of child exploitation that they have reported.
©Elijah Ecu/The Freedom Fund

Promising gains

Successful advocacy

As youth groups engage leaders, there have been significant wins like the enactment of a sub-county bylaw –The Edonga Resolution. The Edonga Resolution prohibits Edonga (traditional evening dances) around school areas. This decision was made because such gatherings exposed girls to being abducted, raped, and forced into marriage. Additionally, these events disrupted school activities, particularly evening study sessions. The issue had been reported by youth groups to the sub-county authorities, who responded by formulating and enforcing this by-law to protect girls and ensure a safe learning environment.

Now, that we were trained in advocacy and communication, we can work with the cultural leaders and with the boy champions to address many child exploitation issues. Whenever the government has a programme, they call us because we have social power to make things happen.

19-year-old Communication Officer in youth group

Male involvement in addressing child exploitation

With the action groups receiving detailed knowledge of the process of responding to incidents, there is increased reporting of trafficking and early marriage, with most of these reports being made by male champions, who refer them to the police, sub-county authorities, and the KAWUO office. The youth are also involved in decision-making processes at district council meetings, child protection forums, and other platforms.

I used to think Gender Based Violence was only a women's issue. Now I understand it's everyone's responsibility, and boys can take the lead.

17-year-old boy, EMAP Nadunget, Youth Advocate

Several male champions, who once supported practices such as early marriage and other harmful cultural norms, are now speaking out against them. For example, one youth advocate recounted how he intervened when his friend attempted to marry off his 14-year-old cousin, successfully convincing the family to keep her in school. Such actions signal a visible cultural shift that is reshaping community norms, protecting girls, and fostering long-term change.

Economic access to reduce exploitation

By being present at community dialogues, sub-county meetings and engaging cultural and local leaders, the youth groups are indirectly reducing child labour, migration and trafficking, as they create awareness of skilling opportunities and access to government programmes for livelihoods support. Most of the members of the youth action groups have started small businesses in mobile money, tailoring, piggery and poultry keeping. This is laying a strong foundation for financial independence and reduced reliance on exploitative relationships.

Our savings group has helped my sister buy school materials. It reduced the pressure for her to get married early.

16-year-old boy, Nadunget Youth VSLA

In numbers



KAWUO **trained 186** youth action group members, district personnel and community leaders.



Police, probation officers, action groups, and local community leaders **rescued 32 trafficked children**, intercepted at Napak checkpoint. The perpetrators were sentenced to six months in prison.

Social change for equal rights

Mindset change has been observed in some families, evidenced by equitable sharing of assets among all children. Girls are also now being allowed to inherit land and cattle previously reserved for male children.

This program really helped me a lot. I was able to talk to my parents about economic support so I could start my own business rather than getting married very early. My dad agreed to give me a piece of land and on top of that, they gave me two cows.

Female participant

More stories are emerging of girls inheriting property, including land and livestock, from their fathers. Many are also respected within their families, with their views valued in household decisions. This progress is a result of the empowerment supported by KAWUO.

A young man, trained by KAWUO, shared his testimony on how he began supporting his wife with domestic work like washing dishes, cooking, and sweeping the compound. He emphasized that nothing bad happened to him as a result and noted that some of his friends have copied his example, leading to happier lives for their wives.

Involvement of girls in decision-making

Government agencies and district officials now proactively involve girls' groups in programs and decision-making because they have become a strong link between leaders and communities, creating awareness about opportunities, policies and providing critical data on child exploitation incidences.

Why the model works

It was important for different types of youth action groups to be sensitised and trained together along with government officials and cultural leaders for a cohesive effort in developing practical solutions, and ensuring an effective response to incidents. For example, legal frameworks are effective only when combined with grassroots ownership; the formal bans on exploitative dances were only possible when culturally supported. This movement of diverse actors supported on-going sensitisation efforts, creating room for dialogues and shifting norms organically.

Continuous capacity-building of the action groups sustained key activities, built ownership, and increased group membership, suggesting that programs that benefit from a tailored curriculum could also be used in other locations.

Strong connections within the community, with people in different roles, was an advantage. For example, KAWUO enrolled trained parasocial workers in the groups which strengthened the reporting of cases, and that, in turn, provided data for advocacy efforts. Local council members were then able to communicate the groups' advocacy issues to the sub-county and the district officials.

Collaboration with government departments supported the enforcement of anti-child marriage and anti-trafficking laws, ensuring that the positive change can be sustained. This collaboration also helped to operationalise referral pathways connecting community activists to health workers, police, and social welfare officers. At the district level, child protection committees chaired by probation officers provided a platform for NGOs and youth advocates to raise cases and coordinate responses.

Economic empowerment through linkages to government development programmes for youth created new sources of income which inspired stronger group advocacy and, for the youth who benefited, this eliminated the need to engage in exploitative labour situations, trafficking or forced marriage.

KAWUO mentors use a training guide which focuses on preventing violence against women and girls. Key topics include understanding gender, power and status, gender roles within households, and the consequences of violence. This ensures that learning is structured and relevant for community awareness messages and effective responses to cases of exploitation.

Challenges

KAWUO's project has to address challenges in participation among some young men. Male groups sometimes face resistance because they are challenging discriminatory social norms that maintain men's authority and privilege. Young men may avoid participation because they fear ridicule and rejection from peer groups, especially by older men. Further, when there is little or no economic benefit, the participation levels of adolescent boys and men is reduced, as men are traditionally expected to be productive in income generating activities.

This challenge is being addressed by stepping up training for boys and male groups and increasing their advocacy for skilling programs. Sharing positive stories of change during public dialogues and community events has also been helpful in building social acceptance and encouraging more boys and men to join the groups.

In addition, boys expressed the need for more discussions about negative social norms that can reach within families, so that fathers can become positive role models that the sons emulate.

Conclusion

This approach is effective as a multi-sectoral, community-led approach that builds local ownership of interventions to end child exploitation. To ensure that the groups continue their advocacy, they require continuous capacity building on new laws, policies, and services related to gender and child protection, alongside refresher trainings on gender based violence, referral pathways, leadership, and advocacy skills. KAWUO also recommends that more exchange visits should be promoted to enable learning from each other's successes.

The youth groups require support to grow their membership and build a movement of trained advocacy groups that cover the entire sub-region to create awareness and promote proven solutions to eliminate child exploitation.

Economic empowerment is equally important because youth who are able to gain skills and income are less vulnerable to exploitation and become stronger advocates for child protection against trafficking and early marriage.

A survivor's story of action to rescue girls

Born in Nadunget sub-county, Moroto District, Jokominah was two years old when her father died, leaving her mother to raise eight children alone. When Jokominah was 12, her mother, overwhelmed and desperate, sent her to live with her grandmother in Napak District. It was a decision that changed Jokominah's life forever.

In Napak, Jokominah's grandmother left her alone to care for a blind grandfather. Facing persistent poverty and hunger, Jokominah decided to join some girls who were planning to go to Nairobi for 'a better life'.

"Nobody told me what Nairobi really meant. I just wanted to escape the struggle," she recalls.

Her journey to Nairobi was facilitated by friends who pooled money to help her travel. However, once there, she quickly realised that the dream was a nightmare. There were none of the promised jobs, and girls from her region had had to turn to crime or begging. The lifestyle was dangerous and Jokominah regretted her decision to migrate to Nairobi.

"I eventually contacted my family and escaped with another girl, hitching rides all the way back to Moroto. When I returned, I didn't recognise home. But when I saw my uncle, a policeman, I called his name and broke down. That was the first time I felt safe again," says Jokominah.

Back in Nadunget, Jokominah joined a community action group supported by KAWUO that provides skills training to adolescents so they can articulate issues around gender-based violence, sexual reproductive health and children's rights with cultural, community and sub-county leaders. First, Jokominah started a local beverages business, earning a daily profit of UGX 15,000–20,000 which was enough to support her family. But her journey didn't stop there:

"Because of the horrible experience I faced, I was shy and could not speak, and yet I really wanted to help my fellow girls not to fall in the same trap. In the group training I heard other young people share their experiences and I also got courage to speak up."

"One day, I heard rumours about two young girls planning to travel to Nairobi. They had been promised a better life. This pained me so much and reminded me of the misery I had faced; I promised never to let them go. I investigated quietly and gathered information on when they were planning to leave. One of the girls had a father in prison and she believed she could help her struggling family. This reminded me of my own reason for going to Nairobi. I decided to tell the village council and the police who intervened and stopped the girls from travelling."

Jokominah is an advocate using her free time to caution adolescent girls about the realities of trafficking. Every Monday during market day, Jokominah speaks to young girls about the harsh reality of trafficking. She uses her own story as a warning. *"Some laughed at me and said they too want to visit Nairobi. They admired the girls from Napak with fancy clothes and hairstyles, but now they know that there is danger in those cities."*





GIVING YOUTH A STRONG VOICE

ADDRESSING CHILD
EXPLOITATION IN
KARAMOJA SUB-REGION



COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION & AWARENESS

Boys and Girls conduct education campaigns addressing the dangers of child trafficking, child marriage, child labour and discriminatory gender norms.



TRADITIONAL LEADERS CHANGE PROMOTE CHANGE

Engage with elders and local leaders to address harmful traditions, formulate action plans and coordinate timely response to cases of exploitation.



MAKING POLICIES DELIVER PROTECTION

Girls and boys identify gaps in protective services and advocate with decision makers at different levels.



PEER EDUCATION & MENTORING

Girls, boys, and adult mentors support each other in their educational and early parenting challenges.



CATALYSING ACTION IN CASES OF EXPLOITATION

Mobilise youth to report cases of child trafficking and child marriage to village leaders and parasocial workers, who escalate these to relevant officials for action.



ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Girls are trained in income generating skills like tailoring, food shops, livestock rearing and linked to government economic programs



KARAMOJA WOMEN
UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION



Students of Kangole Girls Secondary School trained in delivering community dramas to advocate for child protection. ©Elijah Ecrú/The Freedom Fund

Straight Talk Foundation

Partnerships with schools to advance child protection

The problem

In Karamoja sub-region particularly, cultural norms prioritise girls' economic value (through bride price) over education. Struggling to feed their families, parents often allow their children to go off to cities like Nairobi or Kampala to work as domestic servants, which frequently results in abuse, underpaid or unpaid labour, and forced marriage.

Straight Talk Foundation (STF) has been working with schools in the sub-region to encourage school enrolment and retention by building sexual reproductive health awareness and life skills of both in-school and out-of-school children. Studies done by the organisation revealed that when structured activities and parental guidance are lacking during school holidays, children are more vulnerable to early pregnancy, school dropout, and exploitation.

To support children's awareness about child exploitation and how to protect themselves, the organisation designed a school holiday initiative that engaged both in-school and out-of-school children using theatre, radio campaigns, and holiday camps in Napak District.

How the model works

Community theatre

40 children and youth, 10–24 years old, were enrolled in two drama groups to perform community theatre. Recruitment of participants for drama training is conducted with schools and in consultation with community leaders, with participants drawn from different parishes and sub-counties, and including both students and out-of-school youth. Group members are trained to role-play risk scenarios, develop communication skills, and discuss topics around various forms of child exploitation, including child labour, early marriages, and sexual reproductive health (SRHR).

Participants applied their newly acquired skills to create and perform dramas in the community raising awareness through reenactment of different scenarios, for example, parental participation in early marriage for girls in exchange for wealth. This is a safe and non-confrontational way for the youth to engage parents, leaders, and teachers, to protect children and advance solutions to causal factors of child exploitation.

Each performance was followed by a facilitated discussion, allowing the audience to engage, ask questions, and share their thoughts on child protection and SRHR issues. This helped to reinforce key messages and deepen community engagement.

The theatre sessions were also integrated with health service delivery and talks on disease management, teenage pregnancy, menstrual hygiene management, HIV testing and counselling, TB screening, Hepatitis B testing, HCG and malaria testing.

Community theatre, drama skills training, and peer engagement equips young people to recognise, prevent, and respond to child exploitation.

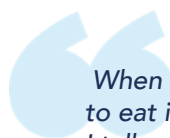
Holiday camps

Holiday camps reinforce awareness and knowledge building around decisions for sexual reproductive health. The two-day camps are facilitated by staff and district officials including the Probation Officer and Labour Officer who explains the referral pathway for reporting incidents of assault, early marriage and other forms of child exploitation. The camps reached 600 adolescents integrating SRHR education, life skills, and access to adolescent-friendly health services. Activities include interactive sessions on menstrual health management, contraceptives, and the prevention of teenage pregnancies, delivered through music, dance, games, and talent shows. Facilitators created safe spaces for youth to receive counselling and build strong peer networks to safeguard against exploitation.

Promising results

Youth advocacy

Empowered youth are influencing change in their communities. From Kangole Girls Secondary School to other sub-counties, trained youth have become informal child protection advocates, raising awareness, reporting exploitation, and mentoring younger peers. Some have directly intervened in cases of early marriage and trafficking, ensuring children remain in school.



When my aunt sent her 10-year-old daughter to work in Nairobi because there was no food to eat in the home, I was disturbed. I learned later that the girl was about to be married off. I talked to my aunt several times; she eventually accepted to have the girl returned home.

Drama group member

At Kangole Girls Secondary School, the drama group brims with confidence as they act out a recent case of child exploitation – a case that they successfully resolved. A member raised an alert in the group about a neighbour who had sent her young child to Nairobi. The group, supported by local leaders and the local village council, persuaded the family to recall the girl, who was then re-enrolled in school. This experience illustrated the power of advocacy, building confidence and inspiring youth to raise awareness through community theatre performances.

Youth-led theatre has helped popularise conversations about children's rights, and parents are increasingly supportive of their children's education, even escorting them to school and visiting during school days.

Crucially, reproductive health counselling has reduced pregnancy cases, with only one pregnancy (0.1%) recorded among girls in Napak under the organisation's scholarship programme (funded through another donor). Youth are now advocating for school attendance and acting as peer mentors for younger children on safe behaviour, legal protection, and life skills development.

Parental involvement and community action

Parental involvement in child protection is evident. For example, more fathers are attending school visitation days whereas previously only mothers were present. Community action has also grown as parents have teamed up to support educational continuity. This has resulted from the community dialogues where parents have asked questions such as:

Now that we have stopped sending our children to Nairobi to work, how are you going to support our children to go to school?

Parent during a community dialogue after a theatre performance

These types of questions stimulate discussion on feasible solutions, create awareness of opportunities offered by different partners and government agencies, as well as enhance collaborative action for the protection of children.

In numbers



STF trained 2 drama groups with 40 children and youth engaged in community theatre.



2 community dramas presented by the drama groups reached 1,714 parents, community leaders, teachers, local authorities, and other young people.



600 children and youth reached during holiday camps with knowledge and strategies to protect themselves against exploitation.

Students of Kangole Secondary act out a common child exploitation scenario.
©Elijah Ecrú/The Freedom Fund





Why the model works

The Straight Talk Foundation has traditionally worked with schools to improve access to sexual reproductive health rights for young people. Building on this experience supported the organisation to secure quick buy-in from school management to broaden issues of interest to include child exploitation which can be partially stemmed with knowledge on their reproductive health rights. The peer-led, participatory approach fosters creativity and ownership among youth as it allows them to be involved in decision-making and problem solving in communities. The youth feel empowered by this level of self-determination, recognition and visible community support.

Before, I couldn't even introduce myself to my group. I could not stand up. But when I joined this group, I gained a lot of confidence, most especially when they chose me to act as that girl who was trafficked and sent to other places to work. I became brave.

Youth participant

Integration with schools and alignment with student leadership structures, such as using information prefects to disseminate anti-exploitation messages at assemblies has ensured that students and school leadership become aware of the actions that can be taken jointly to prevent child exploitation.

When you join the drama group you become a leader. To build your confidence they make you speak in front of the school assembly to gain that confidence. When you see something happening in the community, you must speak up for children's rights.

Youth participant

The holiday youth camps reinforce knowledge about child exploitation, skills in the referral pathway and provide a safe space for personal development in improved communication, self-esteem, and advocacy.

We are activists because we always tell our people that if you educate a girl, you will see what she can do. We give them examples of successful female politicians and teachers.

Youth participant

What I enjoyed most was sharing ideas with peers about the challenges of growing up and how we sometimes find ourselves married off. It was fun and very educational because I understood what I can do to protect myself. I wish the camp could have lasted longer!

Youth participant

Challenges

With regard to the holiday camps, there are challenges for including adolescents with disabilities and those from very impoverished, remote communities. They face physical challenges of access and distance to reach the holiday camps. Organising effective camps also presents logistical challenges, such as securing sheltered venues and audio equipment, and providing food and other refreshments to participants requires significant resources. Volunteers to monitor the children's safety is also a key cost to be covered. Financial constraints hamper the ability to provide regular holiday camps.

During sexual and reproductive health sessions, many participants expressed concerns about the confidentiality of health services provided, especially when other community members were present. Despite efforts to create private consultation booths, a few adolescents are still hesitant to approach health workers.

Conclusion

The community theatres and camps held during the holiday season support young people's mentorship, empowerment, and active community involvement in child protection activities. Drama and theatre are not only powerful tools for disseminating information but also for building emotional resilience, confidence, and agency among young people. The integration of SRHR services has further strengthened the model, contributing to improved retention, reduced pregnancies, and stronger parental support. By combining youth-to-youth mentorship, community dialogues, and institutional backing, the model is shifting norms and improving child protection efforts in Napak District.

Ariko becomes a male change agent

Ariko Geoffrey, 20 years old, is a senior six student studying at Moroto High School. He grew up in Napak District where early marriages were the norm. During one of the holidays, he was invited by Straight Talk Foundation to join the youth drama group after being recommended by his class teacher.

"Growing up, I thought child marriage and children being sent away to work was normal because I saw them happening at my home. During the drama we understood that these practices are harmful to children. Now I know my rights, and I believe child exploitation can be stopped. I am happy that I can also support change and find help for other children. In our theatre, we are constantly talking to community leaders to protect children. I hope this program can reach other parts of Karamoja," Geoffrey says.

Through the youth theatre activities, Geoffrey became aware of the different forms of child exploitation and their harmful consequences, including poverty, orphanhood, school dropouts, and maternal deaths due to early pregnancies. He also learned where to access help if needed, including youth-friendly corners for SRHR services, the Police Child and Family Protection Unit, the Probation Office, and local health centres.



Partnerships with Schools to Advance Child Protection

ADDRESSING CHILD
EXPLOITATION IN
KARAMOJA SUB-REGION

DRAMA SKILLS TRAINING

for youth to disseminate child protection messages through community-based theatre performances.



RADIO CAMPAIGNS

to raise wider awareness both through radio spots and talkshows. Community radio is a trusted source of information.



COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Encouraging youth to speak out so they confidently report cases to village authorities and officials.



HOLIDAY CAMPS & PEER MEETINGS

These provide fun activities during which youth learn about child protection and sexual reproductive health



PEER-TO-PEER MENTORSHIP

Youth share experiences of overcoming challenges around exploitation, education and support each other for their rights and reporting of incidents.



Members of the farmer field school
trained in climate smart agriculture.
©Elijah Ecpu/The Freedom Fund



African Youth Alliance Development Organisation

Household food security enhances child protection

The problem

In the Karamoja sub-region, child exploitation is closely linked to climate-induced food insecurity, triggered by prolonged droughts. With the depletion of traditional livelihoods, young women and girls are compelled to migrate to urban areas for survival, where they face exploitation, including forced labour and trafficking. Climate change is also driving child marriage.

How the model works

The African Youth Alliance Development Organisation (AYADO) is working to disrupt child exploitation by strengthening community livelihoods through climate adaptation skills in farmer field schools, Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA), vocational skilling and alternative livelihoods for women and adolescents in Napak District.

The model centres around the formation of VSLA groups comprising the most vulnerable women -returnees from trafficking, widows, adolescent girls and teenage parents. Through the weekly meetings of VSLAs, adolescent girls and women provide moral and psychosocial support to their peers who are emotionally distressed as a result of human trafficking and abuse. This has helped them to move towards healing, and to rediscover their purpose. This is one of the ways that climate adaptation and livelihoods combine together with community ownership of addressing the root causes of child exploitation.

In these groups, the participants are trained in climate-adaptive farming through developing demonstration sites as farmer field schools.



Members of the farmer field school.
©Elijah Ecrú/The Freedom Fund

Climate-smart agricultural training

The women are trained by AYADO staff and agronomists on cultivation of quick maturing vegetables, sustainable soil use practices, nursery bed management, planting techniques, and organic manure from cattle waste. Research Institutions such as the National Crops Resources Research Institute provide technical guidance on climate-resilient crop varieties.

The groups are given seeds for vegetables like kale, okra, amaranths and cabbage as well as watering cans to set up vegetable gardens outside their own homes for consumption and for sale in markets. This provides sustainable food sources and generates income for families, mitigating pressures that lead to urban migration, child trafficking and child labour.

A key innovation by one of the groups has been the establishment of a school-based demonstration garden by parents and caregivers where gardens are cultivated at the school where their children learn. The school is a training site, enabling students and parents to learn and replicate skills at home, while nutritious vegetables are readily available for school feeding, which, in turn, promotes regular school attendance.

Vocational skills and start-up support

Women in these communities are also enrolled in skilling programmes for tailoring, production of energy-saving stoves, apiary management and other marketable trades at AYADO skilling centres in the sub-county. They receive start-up kits to establish their own businesses and AYADO continues to mentor graduates, linking them to employment and sustainable livelihoods.

Two women's groups were supported with poultry farming as a climate resilient alternative income generating source. AYADO staff trained program participants on basic poultry management and disease control measures as well as supplying them with poultry.

Apiary training as a sustainable income-generating skill

The sub-county commercial department recommended apiary (beekeeping) as a relevant market-focused business for the region. Members of the VSLA are trained on the importance of apiculture, site selection, baiting beehives, harvesting and marketing. Beneficiaries learned the importance of using modern beehives and good apiary management practices to increase productivity and profitability. One model apiary site has been established. Group members meet every week to plan and discuss challenges and lessons learnt.

Promising gains

Food security and income growth

Participants are confidently growing crops such as Sukuma wiki, cowpeas, cabbage, tomatoes, and eggplants. With improved nutrition they feel better physically and emotionally, and the ability to sell the surplus is building their confidence to support their families without subjecting their children to exploitative labour.

Through access to microloans based on group savings, the adolescent girls, women and young parents can now support their households and start small enterprises to secure their livelihoods. While some participants initially focused all their earnings solely on household immediate needs, continuous sensitisation and financial skills training within the savings and loans associations has led to better investment practices. The reduction in households without any income shows tangible results. Women's contributions are now recognised by men, shifting perceptions of wealth beyond cattle to diversified livelihoods.

Stories from bee owners and from tailoring graduates who have opened workshops demonstrate the power of relevant skilling in building family incomes to support their children and keep them from being trafficked or married off early. Apiary projects are introducing additional sustainable income and ecosystem benefits.

We were trained to grow the vegetables in lines and the reason why this soil is supposed to be heaped up to this level. We use local manure from our cows which is the best manure. When the vegetables grow from the nursery bed, we transplant them to this garden. We were trained for a week and after the vegetables have grown up, we apply the pesticides. That is why you see our garden is looking nice. Every week I make a profit of about UGX 20,000 (USD 5). My plan is to take my daughter to nursery school. Before I had no money, now I can pay for her.

Young parent

This money is helping to maintain my home. If there is no food at home, you wake up and the children have run away to the cities to go and look for what to eat. When there is food at home, children stay.

Mother with child returned from trafficking



Abaratadadang group members setting up a wet garden.

In numbers



Increased access to credit from VSLA loans of USD 2,800 (UGX 10,080,000) have been used for running micro-business.



AYADO successfully **trained 250 adolescent girls and young women** on VSLA methodology.



102 households were supported with climate-smart agriculture training and inputs.



Decrease in percentage of adolescent girls and young women households reporting no income source, from 67% at the beginning of project now reduced to 23%.



188 returnees from trafficking and 62 teenage mothers enrolled in VSLA support groups.

Why the model works

Financial empowerment

The causes of child exploitation are rooted in economic instability. Once households realise that they can access money weekly through kitchen gardening and also start businesses that can withstand climate disruption, they are encouraged to plan and budget for their money to meet household needs rather than marry off children or send them away for domestic labour to earn. Financial access is therefore a key pillar of the success of the model especially since it engages both men and women.

Peer-to-peer psychosocial support

As the group largely comprises those who have previously been trafficked and those from vulnerable households, peer mentors within groups are supporting young parents, adolescent youth and survivors to cope economically and overcome trauma by sharing successful experiences, building their self-confidence, and collaborating in income generating activities to avoid relapse into child exploitation activities.

Community collaboration for accessible, relevant skilling and training

The climate-smart agricultural skills are easily adaptable and transferable leading to strong adoption by the VSLA groups. By leveraging existing social structures such as schools and community groups, the model builds trust, shared responsibility, and sustainability. Simple farming methods, provision of farming inputs, easy-to-understand financial practices, and market-relevant skills ensure that members have multiple pathways to resilience and remain engaged, as the benefits are realised consistently and within a relatively short period.

Challenges

Some VSLA group members are reluctant to borrow loans from their savings groups to start micro businesses for income generation. This is because they fear the risks of borrowing as well as the pressure from group members to pay back loans. However, borrowing and investment is a key part of income generation, and the VSLA offers easily accessible capital at the village level. Field staff continuously sensitised saving groups about the VSLA objective, and beneficiary groups were encouraged to use loans acquired to finance selected enterprises to enhance their household incomes.

Conclusion

The model tackles the interconnected vulnerabilities of food insecurity, migration, and child exploitation, by creating sustainable opportunities for household incomes and group socio-economic support. When families have the skills and resources to grow their own food and earn from the surplus to meet their basic needs, they are less likely to resort to risky migration or expose children to exploitation. Simple interventions, such as kitchen gardens can create long-term benefits by strengthening household resilience, promoting economic independence, and supporting child protection. Provision of equipment for value addition – of grinding mills, for example - can support increased uptake and enhance community production.

Success story:

A second chance atLife

By the time Nakut Cecilia left Napak District for Kampala, she had already dropped out of school due to lack of school fees and she was several months pregnant. She was persuaded by her peers to travel to Kampala with the promise of lucrative work to make a new life for herself and her baby.

But on the streets of Kampala, she found hunger, homelessness, and long days begging. Things only grew harder when she had her baby - struggling not just for herself, but now for her child.

"I had no food, no shelter, and no one to help me," Cecilia says. "Life was so painful."

Eventually, Cecilia decided to return to Napak where she reconnected with a classmate who told her about skilling being provided by AYADO in her village. Nakut hoped she could get a second chance to build her life, and she chose tailoring. The girls in her group all had similar experiences of migrating to cities only to return bruised and empty-handed.

"Before this, I had nothing. Now I can make clothes and earn something to feed my baby."

With her new tailoring skills, Nakut began sewing for community residents, and eventually used her savings to start a local snacks business. She wants to move to the nearby town in order to get more customers for her garments. At 21, Nakut now runs a modest but stable operation: sewing garments and selling chapatis from a rented space in her community.

"I feel proud of what I have been able to build; I hope that one day I can have my own shop stocked with fabrics. If I can get more funding, I can grow, get more customers, more machines, and a real business," Nakut says.



FOOD SECURITY FOR HOUSEHOLD RESILIENCE

ADDRESSING CHILD
EXPLOITATION IN
KARAMOJA SUB-REGION



CLIMATE-SMART AGRICULTURAL SKILLS

Survivors of trafficking are trained to grow nutritious crops – that also build regular income.

DEMONSTRATION GARDENS

These are set up, including at schools, so children and parents can learn to grow vegetables.

VILLAGE SAVINGS & LOAN ASSOCIATIONS

These offer mutual support to resist child exploitation – as well as microloans to expand kitchen gardens or start additional businesses.

MARKET LINKAGES

The groups sell surplus produce, generating income for school materials and health care.

ALTERNATIVE SKILLS

Participants learn other market-relevant skills like apiary management and poultry keeping - ensuring they have multiple ways to make income

QUALITY INPUTS

Groups get climate-resilient seeds, as well as follow-up technical advice.



African Youth Alliance
Development Organization



Nascent Research and Development Organisation

Financial empowerment for child protection

The problem

It is common in Karamoja subregion for impoverished families to marry off their children for bride price or send them away to relatives in hopes of better care and jobs, only for the children to face different forms of violence and exploitation. Addressing this, the Nascent Research and Development Organisation (NRDO) implements a programme which promotes youth empowerment through life skills trainings and enabling youth to use drama as an awareness tool. They also form Village Saving and Loans Associations (VSLA) to empower families to build financial resources and avoid child exploitation.

How the model works

Young parents, adolescent girls and older mothers are supported to form VSLAs as self-managed savings groups. Through the VSLAs, members pool their savings on a weekly basis, access small loans to start or strengthen businesses, and build a social fund for emergencies. This financial system enables young parents to improve household income, meet children's basic needs, and reduce the risks that drive children into exploitation.

Beyond financial services, the VSLA provides a safe space for peer support, learning, and collective action. Young parents in particular benefit from these groups as they gain not only economic stability but also exposure to knowledge on child protection, education, and positive parenting.

In schools, trained youth use these skills to conduct peer-to-peer sensitisation during assemblies and one-on-one interactions, empowering fellow students to resist child exploitation, including early marriage, until they complete their education.

For youth outside school, particularly young parents in VSLA groups, life skills training enables them to sensitise community members about the dangers of child exploitation through public gatherings and local meetings.

VSLA members sometimes use community dramas as a complementary tool to raise awareness on critical issues of child exploitation such as child marriage, child trafficking and child labour. These dramas start dialogue and action within the community. After performances, youth facilitate feedback sessions where community members reflect on the dangers of child exploitation based on the theme of the play. From these discussions, plans are developed by the community members, strengthening collective responsibility and prevention efforts.

Parent care support groups

In the VSLA, small groups of 8–10 young parents are formed as parent care support groups. These groups meet weekly to discuss issues affecting their children and families. During the meetings, members learn positive parenting skills, child protection, health and nutrition, and life skills such as communication and conflict management. The discussions also provide a safe space for young parents to share experiences, support one another emotionally, and plan collective actions such as sensitising neighbours on child exploitation, monitoring school attendance, and reporting abuse cases.

Promising gains

Young mothers are encouraged by the opportunity to meet their peers, save in a community group and build up their financial resources through micro-savings and access to small loans for business growth. The mentorship they receive within the group regarding child protection and household management is also important as it provides social and emotional stability. This encourages them to continue to attend the VSLA meetings where discussions on child protection can be continued.

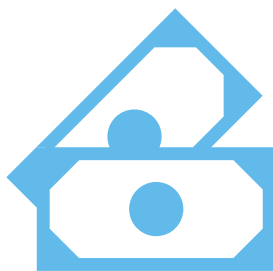
For example, in the Leoron VSLA group, the children reported to their parents that the food served at Timingorok school lacked essential ingredients such as salt and sugar. In response, the young parents of the Leoron group voluntarily contributed UGX 20,000 from their group's boda-boda transport service earnings to purchase salt and sugar for the school, which they then handed over to the headteacher. This demonstrated VSLA members' commitment to their children's well-being.

Community members have begun reporting cases of child trafficking to the sub-county office, the local councillors (LC1) and the police. Children previously out of school have been re-enrolled, following dialogues that emphasised the legal right to education. Local councillors in Kosiroi and Timingorok villages have intervened to resolve cases of child marriage, in line with national laws protecting children. In Kosiroi, a case of child sexual abuse was reported both to the police officers for legal action and to the project staff for follow-up and support. There has also been stronger school-community collaboration, with teachers and parents jointly following up on absenteeism to ensure children attend school.



VSLA group member explains how access to the group loans has helped her start a business. ©Elijah Ecrú/The Freedom Fund

In numbers



3 VSLA groups have been established in two villages to continue promoting savings, financial empowerment, and youth engagement in child protection initiatives. VSLAs are also linked with schools, health centres, and community groups for joint initiatives, mentorship, financial literacy training, business skills, and entrepreneurship to enhance their capacity to manage and grow their savings and loans.

Regina's Rise: How small savings sparked big change

Regina, a teenage mother from Timingorok, Moroto District, once struggled to provide for her family. Like many women in her village, her main income came from selling cassava, often barely enough to get by. She had never saved any money, and emergencies often found her empty handed.

When the Leoron VSLA group was pioneered in her village, Regina was among the first to join. The group taught her the power of saving together. Every Wednesday, she put aside some money and an additional amount for the group's emergency fund and savings box.

"Before, we used to get money and finish it," Regina explained. "Now, with the saving boxes, there's another way we can save. We bring what we can."

By pooling together small amounts every week, Regina and the other young mothers have created a financial safety net and learned to think about their earnings differently – no longer as something that slips away, but as a tool for building new opportunities. With her savings, Regina has grown her business selling beans, groundnuts, and maize. She has been able to borrow from the group to expand her stall, buy better produce, and attract more customers. For the first time, she has a plan to reinvest and see her income grow.

The success goes beyond the financials. As a VSLA member, Regina also participates in community theatre, performing dramas in the market to raise awareness of the dangers of child labour, child marriage, and trafficking.

"Through drama, our stories are seen," she said. "People watch and understand why we say 'no' to child exploitation. Together, we ask the community: 'What can we do?' The answer is always the same: 'Send children to school, protect them, and respect the laws'."

Members now recognise the value of saving and are better able to access and utilise money to grow a larger financial base. The financial activities are enhancing social bonding as young mothers support each other, sharing parenting and financial management experiences.

Why the model works

By combining social and economic empowerment, the model builds financial stability and enhances collective action to address the problems that exacerbate child exploitation. Given that there are multiple activities for members including the parent support group meetings, life skills sessions and participation in community dramas, members are engaged in meaningful ways and thus remain consistent group participants which also attracts more members – those at-risk and survivors.

The model focuses on community autonomy in generating solutions to household and community problems including child exploitation. For example, the drama topics are selected by members themselves, increasing members' buy-in and community relevance.

Peer mentorship builds confidence for problem sharing where role models who have faced similar adversity educate and mentor their peers. This form of mentorship is more effective due to shared experiences and practical problem solving.

Challenges

When it comes to reporting incidents, some villages are remotely located from police posts and sub-county offices which discourages timely reporting of child exploitation cases. Impoverished families lack transport to subcounty offices leading to delayed reporting, while other cases are unreported.

Conclusion

The VSLA functions as both a socio-economic empowerment platform and a community entry point for broader awareness-raising and behaviour change interventions. Integrated participatory approaches are effective as they address both economic and social dimensions of vulnerability and this yields strong outcomes that engage both men and women.



Savings group members.
©Elijah E cru/The Freedom Fund

SECURING LIVELIHOODS FOR CHILD PROTECTION

ADDRESSING CHILD
EXPLOITATION IN
KARAMOJA SUB-REGION

YOUTH ACTION
GROUPS FOR LIFE
SKILLS AND USING
DRAMA FOR
OUTREACH



SURVIVORS & YOUTH AT
RISK FORM VILLAGE
SAVINGS & LOANS GROUPS
FOR INCOME
GENERATION



POSITIVE PARENTING
GROUPS & YOUNG
PARENTS MENTORING



**COLLECTIVE ACTION TO REMOVE CHILDREN
FROM HARMFUL LABOUR**





Support for year-round irrigation has enabled women to establish flourishing gardens of popular vegetables. ©Elijah Ecu/The Freedom Fund

Grassroots Alliance for Rural Development

Climate smart adaptations accelerate household stability

The problem

Karamoja sub-region is prone to prolonged droughts which discourage agricultural activity due to insufficient water for irrigation. This, in turn, triggers food scarcity resulting in hungry families who become vulnerable to pressures of child trafficking. In Napak district, Grassroots Alliance for Rural Development (GARD), with support from development partners, government ministries and district local governments has been working with women and youth groups through Farmer Field Schools (FFSs) to address factors that drive exploitation in multiple forms, including trafficking.

How the model works

GARD's model focuses on establishing a women-led irrigation facility with market-relevant climate smart agro-pastoral practices including use of short maturing crops, timely planting, drought tolerant and resistant varieties. The goal is to improve livelihoods and nutrition of survivors of trafficking and other at-risk persons by supporting them to plant a variety of vegetables, such as amaranth, onion, cowpeas, sukuma wiki, okra and cabbage.

GARD supported FFSs to use techniques such as drip irrigation where water is put in a plastic bottle which hangs over the plants and drips on the plants. These crops mature quickly, meeting household nutritional needs with the surplus sold in the market, improving household incomes.

To support their healing journey, the survivors are supported by parasocial workers who provide psychosocial assistance, basic medical care and support for reintegration in schools and the community. District local personnel orient survivors and communities on the existing district child protection ordinance which is supposed to prevent children's movement out of the region.

The women in the FFS also form savings and loans associations (VSLA) groups to be able to access loans to start small businesses and be able to earn and save. The group savings are tracked using mobile phones for easier management and record keeping, as well as safety from theft and record keeping.

Over 90% of Karamoja's rural households cook with firewood, putting local forests at risk. As part of resilience-building, FFS members are trained in how to make and use fuel-efficient cook stoves. According to the women, there has been a dramatic improvement in air quality in and around their homes, reduced labour burden and saving of time spent on collecting firewood.

The farmer groups cultivate a variety of vegetables, including Sukuma wiki, tomatoes, onions, cowpeas, and eggplants. The groups have adopted climate smart agricultural practices like cover cropping, timely planting, use of drought resistant varieties leading to increased productivity for consumption and market sales. The savings have been used to start small businesses like outlets for sale of local brew and pastry or snack shops.

Promising gains

The irrigation facilities are maintained by the women and are creating opportunities for household incomes and food security over time. This economic stability removes their vulnerability to exploitation and child trafficking, as they can now provide for their households.

VSLAs provide an emergency social fund which is offered to a family that is faced with a hazard and households that are part of a VSLA can also acquire a loan to use in the recovery process.

The success of kitchen gardens among women has caught men's attention, and some men now participate in the groups. For example, Kodet Emmanuel a member of Kitogogong Akiyar group mobilised his peers to help several women's groups prepare a larger plot of land for vegetable production. He also encouraged other men to join groups where their wives are group members to tend to the gardens. Emmanuel has become a role model to other men, and GARD has also trained him as a community facilitator.

Increased household income through VSLA groups has supported parents and caregivers to pay school fees of their children, and in the meetings, parents are able to have conversations on child labour, early marriages and decide on actions they will take to avoid or respond to cases of exploitation.

Women are able to harvest vegetables all year from their gardens



In numbers



6 women FFS groups have been established, each with 20 members. Members are identified during community meetings and through assessments of level of vulnerability. Returnees and those with children who have gone to urban areas are prioritised as group members.

Alice's harvest brings household stability

Alice, a member of one of the women's groups in Lotutuwa subcounty, was a beneficiary of the climate-smart agriculture training. Her life was transformed when she started planting on her own land.

"Ever since we were trained on how to water vegetables using borehole water, we have planted cow peas more than 10 times on the same piece of land. The sale of the vegetables has helped us buy salt, medicine, books for children and to save in the group. When the borehole broke, we all contributed money and repaired it," says Alice.

Alice was able to grow a large crop of vegetables and earn UGX 70,000, part of which she re-invested in expanding her garden, purchasing household supplies and a mobile phone. Today, she is considered a wealthy lady, and her husband has since returned and works with her in the vegetable garden.

"Ever since I started planting, I have been getting money every week and I have covered my children's fees, and I also buy household supplies. Our family has been stabilised. With my husband and children, I hope to grow more vegetables like eggplants because people really demand them, and now I can water my plants all year," says Alice.

Image: Women from a group, like the one Alice belongs to, harvesting vegetables



Why the model works

Collaboration and coordination efforts with government institutions and multiple civil society partners have contributed to the overall effectiveness and sustainability of the project interventions through regular information sharing and enforcement of child protection laws. For example, the police at sub-county checkpoints coordinate with probation officers monitoring children leaving the region who are at risk of trafficking. The local council in all the villages receive movement permits issued by the probation office to be completed for children moving out of the sub-county. The FFS groups play a critical role in alerting law enforcement and other officials about missing children to ensure they are returned home.

The role of men and boys in the groups promotes inclusivity which ensures that there is joint ownership and participation in the agricultural and economic activities. Men are proactive as change agents within the women led initiatives, using training that they received earlier from other NGOs in how to advocate for transformation of discriminatory gender norms. This inclusivity of the groups supports sharing of roles between men and women, which increases the success of the farming and the effective management of incomes from small businesses that have been started.

Challenges

Survivors face stigma from other community members, including family members, and often they have expectations of housing, food and clothing when they are reintegrated into the communities. These are hopes that the government departments cannot fulfil because they are under-resourced. It was therefore important to link survivors with multiple organisations for skilling and startup assistance as well as psychosocial support and continuous engagement in group activities. When causal factors are not addressed, returnees in most cases still opt to return to the cities, so continuous community sensitisation on supporting returnees and collectively addressing exploitation is critical.

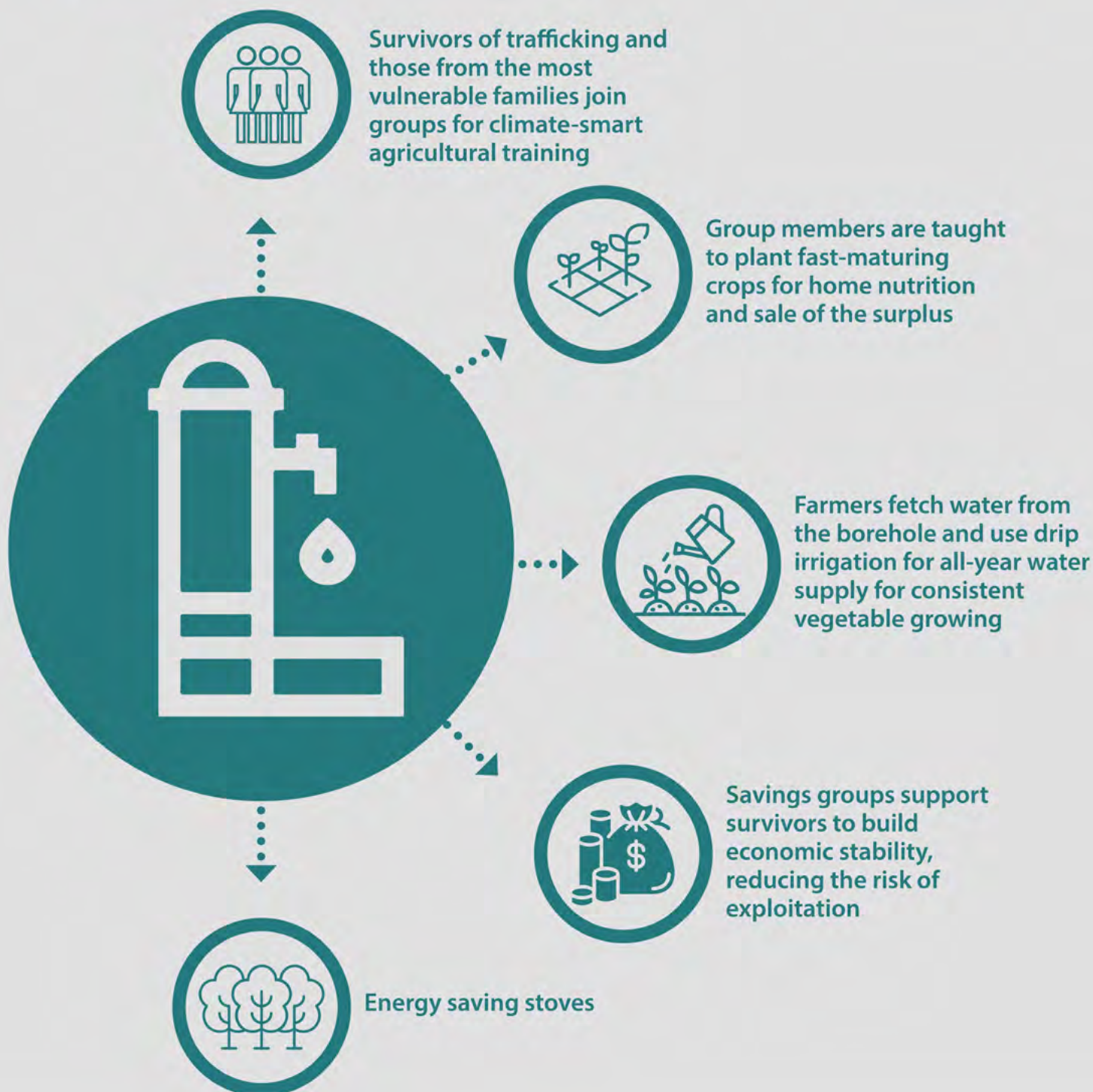
Conclusion

Climate adaptation strategies give households opportunities to improve incomes and food security, which directly reduces their vulnerability to trafficking and child exploitation. VSLA structures can be strengthened through continuous trainings, establishment of strong leadership, registration and linkages to district and sub county government opportunities. Given the crucial role that government teams play in reintegration, more adequate funding would be important so they can provide relevant resources to survivors and those at risk.



YEAR-ROUND WATER FOR HOUSEHOLD AGRIBUSINESS REDUCES CHILD EXPLOITATION

ADDRESSING CHILD
EXPLOITATION IN
KARAMOJA SUB-
REGION



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Our vision is a world free of slavery.



MISSION

We invest in frontline organisations and movements to drive a measurable reduction of modern slavery in high-prevalence countries and industries.

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