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Policy Coherence for Water Security in the Karamoja–Turkana Complex between Uganda and Kenya

**Aligning Institutions, Incentives, and Investments
for a Changing Drylands Region**

Alan Nicol, Jackie Akot Abalo, Lucky Sarafina Nakiru, and Simon Thuo



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Audience and intended use

Primary audience: Uganda Government decision-makers with mandates over water, land, mining, decentralization, and Karamoja development — in particular the Ministry of Water and Environment (MWE), the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM, as lead coordinator under the Karamoja Integrated Development Plan, KIDP), the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development (MLHUD), the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development (MEMD), the Ministry of Local Government (MoLG), the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MoFPED), and Parliament’s Committee on Natural Resources. **Secondary audience:** Turkana County Government and the Government of Kenya (in particular the Water Resources Authority (WRA) and the State Department for Northern Kenya), IGAD, and development partners financing water and resilience programs in the KTC. **Intended use:** to support specific, named policy revisions in Uganda (Track 1) and a parallel cross-border policy and operational track between Uganda and Kenya (Track 2). The asks in Section 7 are written to be directly actionable by the addressees named in each row.

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Cover photo: Local leaders survey Longoromit Dam, July 2024, Kaabong District. (*Photo:* Alan Nicol/IWMI)

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ASAL	Arid and Semi-Arid Lands
CEWARN	Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (IGAD)
CMO	Catchment Management Organization
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (United Kingdom)
FY	fiscal year
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Agency for International Cooperation)
ICPAC	IGAD Climate Prediction and Applications Centre
ICPALD	IGAD Centre for Pastoral Areas and Livestock Development
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
KIDP	Karamoja Integrated Development Plan
KTC	Karamoja–Turkana Complex
MEMD	Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development (Uganda)
MLHUD	Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development (Uganda)
MoFPED	Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (Uganda)
MoLG	Ministry of Local Government (Uganda)
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MWE	Ministry of Water and Environment (Uganda)
NEMA	National Environment Management Authority (Uganda)
O&M	operation and maintenance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister (Uganda)
ULGA	Uganda Local Governments Association
UPDF	Uganda People's Defence Force
WRA	Water Resources Authority (Kenya)
WUC	Water User Committee

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1. Key Points

Water security in the Karamoja–Turkana Complex (KTC) along the upper portion of the Kenya–Uganda border (Fig. 1) is undermined not by hydrology alone but by incoherence across policies, institutions, and incentive systems. This is actively produced and sustained by power asymmetries and elite interests rather than being a merely structural or administrative problem (Nicol et al., 2025; Nicol, 2024). Sectoral priorities operate in silos; central and district mandates contradict one another; catchment planning downplays mobility and political economy realities; and formal governance structures fail to incorporate effectively local authority and indigenous knowledge.

This report identifies six Ugandan policy instruments whose mutual misalignment drives incoherence in the KTC: the National **Water for Production** investment policy and its associated criteria; the **conditional-grant architecture** governing district water-sector financing under decentralization; the **Mining Act 2022 and concession-licensing system**; the **Land Act 1998** and the absence of a Karamoja-specific land governance provision; the **Catchment Management Organization (CMO) frameworks** for the Lokok, Lokere, and Awoja catchments; and the **2019 Uganda–Kenya Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on reciprocal grazing and resource sharing**. Section 7 sets out specific revisions to each, with named lead actors and indicative timelines.

Policy incoherence in the Karamoja Cluster is not only caused by coordination failure, rather it is sustained by political economies in which water scarcity generates substantial rents. Tanker operators in Lodwar earn an estimated USD 4–7 million annually from artificial scarcity (REACH, 2021); politically connected drilling contractors capture county tender processes; and downstream irrigation schemes in both countries enclose former dry-season grazing reserves under elite ownership. Incoherence fundamentally disrupts the social contract underpinning pastoral economies: When rivers dry, the resulting livestock losses trigger cascading household asset erosion, forcing distress migration that strains kinship networks, heightens inter-clan competition, and destabilises customary conflict-resolution mechanisms that have historically mediated resource access across the Kenya–Uganda border.

Achieving resilience requires a shift toward greater policy coherence—aligning water, land, mobility, extractive industries and decentralization policies; synchronizing district and catchment plans; embedding pastoral mobility and cross-border diplomacy into official systems; strengthening governance before infrastructure investment; and centring women and youth in decision-making from the start. Only through such coherence can water become an effective catalyst for stability and development rather than dispute and insecurity in one of East Africa’s most complex dryland regions (Nicol et al., 2025; Thuo, 2025).

2. Introduction

The drylands of Karamoja in Uganda and neighboring Turkana in Kenya are being reshaped by forces far larger than their sparse watercourses. Climatic volatility, rapid population growth, accelerating mineral extraction, a widening cash economy, as well as proposed major infrastructure developments are shaping how water and land resources are used, valued, and contested across the region (Thuo, 2025; Nicol, 2024).

Water scarcity in the Karamoja Cluster operates as a cascade. Failed wells and dried springs trigger livestock asset losses, which force distress sales below market value that erode household reproductive capacity. This compels distress migration outside customary calendars, straining kinship-based reciprocity systems, which weakens the traditional councils that historically mediated cross-border resource access. By the time conflict erupts at a contested borehole, the social infrastructure for resolving it has already collapsed (Schilling et al., 2012; Opiyo et al., 2016). Policy that intervenes only at the conflict node — through security deployments or peace dialogues — misses the upstream water governance failure that initiated the cascade.

This report uses **policy coherence** as its central analytical lens. Following the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2019) recommendation and adapting it to the dryland governance context, we distinguish three dimensions that are often conflated in policy debate but operate through different mechanisms:

- **Vertical coherence** — alignment across levels of government (national ministries, regional bodies, districts/counties, and sub-county and ward administrations), particularly between mandates and the financial and human resources required to deliver them.
- **Horizontal coherence** — alignment across sectors (water, land, mining, agriculture, livestock, security, environment) and across spatial planning units (catchments, administrative districts, and cross-border corridors), so that the priorities of one sector do not systematically undermine those of another.
- **Social coherence** — alignment between formal state institutions and the customary, gendered, and generational systems through which resources are actually accessed, contested, and managed in everyday life. Social incoherence is the gap between systems designed on paper and systems lived in practice.

In what follows, we use this three-part framing to track which dimension is at stake in each section. The Karamoja-Turkana Complex (KTC), we argue, suffers acutely from all three—and in mutually reinforcing ways.

As pressures mount, the institutional and policy environment governing water and land remains a patchwork: fragmented, layered, and increasingly misaligned with the wider political economy of the KTC (Le Sève, 2018; Nicol et al., 2025). This brief focuses on the water side of the equation and argues that addressing water security in this water-scarce environment requires something more than drilling new boreholes or constructing ever-larger dams. It demands a fundamental rethinking of how policies, institutions, and incentives can be better aligned across sectors, levels of government, borders, and social systems (Nicol et al., 2025; Nicol, 2024). Without such essential policy coherence, new investments at best risk deepening the vulnerabilities they aim to reduce, at worst, triggering new levels of human insecurity.

Karamoja's water situation illustrates these dynamics vividly. Water is central to every livelihood transition unfolding across the region ranging from pastoral mobility to artisanal mining, and from settled agriculture to wage labor (Thuo, 2025). Yet water systems sometimes become flashpoints where these changes intersect. Pastoralists follow increasingly unpredictable rainfall patterns; food systems are subject to drought; mining enterprises demand increasing quantities of water; wildlife moves through the same resource corridors in search of water and grazing; and political pledges to expand infrastructure create popular expectations that districts can neither finance nor govern (Nicol, 2024; Le Sève, 2018).

A note on strategic scope. The report is structured around **two distinct advocacy tracks**. **Track 1** comprises Uganda-domestic policy revisions that the Government of Uganda can advance unilaterally — reforms to the Water for Production policy, conditional-grant architecture, mining EIA process, Land Act, and CMO frameworks — and these are the primary asks of this brief. **Track 2** comprises bilateral and cross-border instruments that require concerted action by the Governments of Uganda and Kenya, (and) with IGAD facilitation — principally the renewal of the 2019 MoU and the establishment of joint monitoring and arbitration mechanisms. Turkana evidence is used both comparatively (to strengthen Uganda-focused asks) and substantively (to ground the Track 2 recommendations). Each recommendation in Section 7 is tagged Track 1 or Track 2 to make this distinction operational.

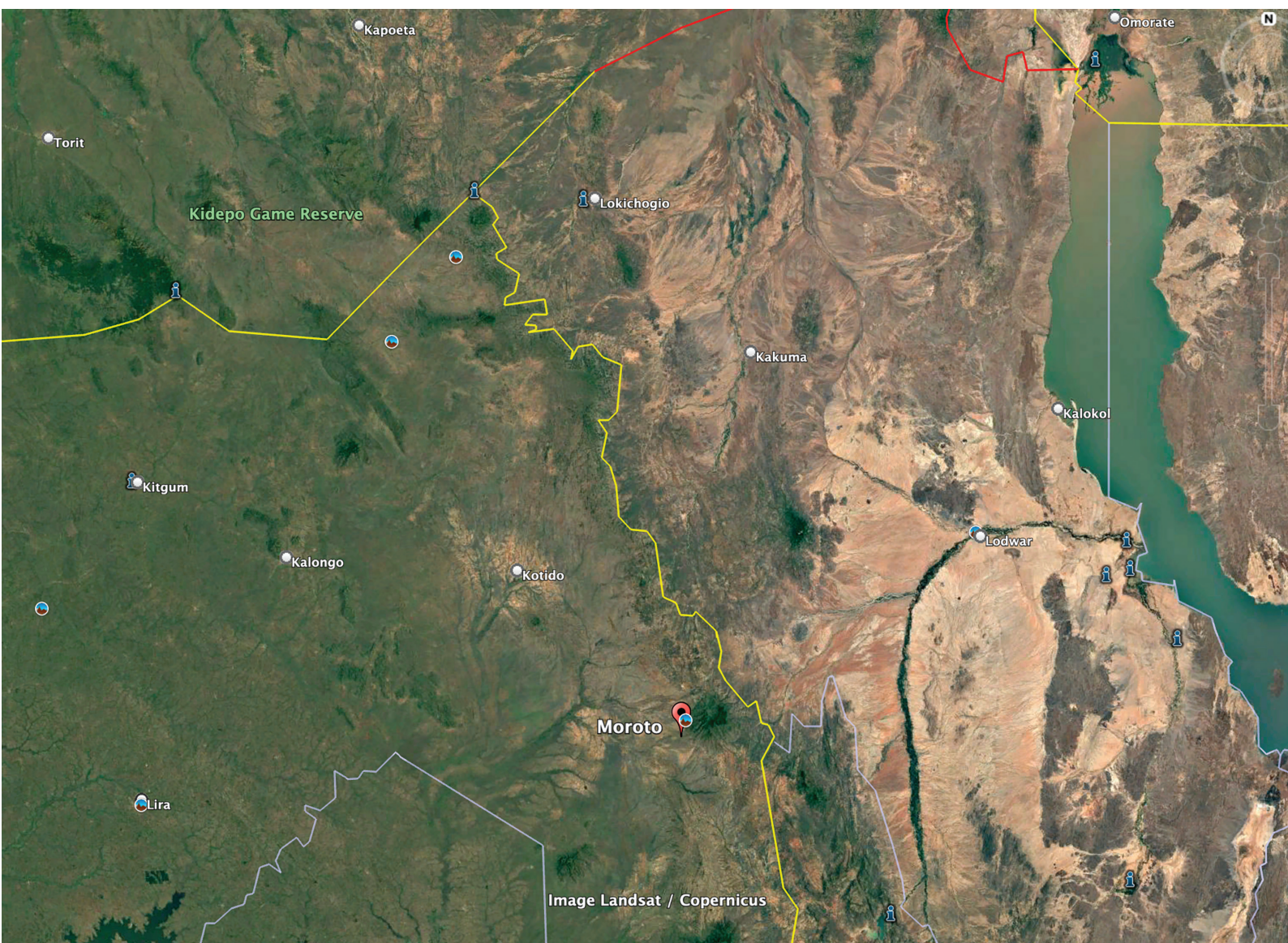


FIGURE 1. Map of Uganda–Kenya border (Source: Wikimedia Commons).

Changing climate patterns compound the problems of coherence, including concentrating people and livestock around the remaining perennial sources and intensifying environmental stress in years of critically low rainfall (Catley et al., 2021; Nicol et al., 2025). Beneath these pressures lies a governance landscape where responsibilities are unclear, incentives misaligned, and institutional structures mismatched with the realities of dryland socio-ecology. As the example of Longoromit Dam in Kaabong District demonstrates, fundamental problems of governing the resource suggest critical policy incoherence issues at multiple levels.

Climate finance, while theoretically expanding, remains practically inaccessible to pastoral counties. Between 2018 and 2022, Turkana County secured KES 47 million of approximately KES 2.1 billion¹ available nationally — 2.2% — despite hosting 8% of Kenya's ASAL population (Atela et al., 2020). Application processes require approximately 280 person-hours of specialized technical input; review committees systematically favor fixed-asset urban projects over mobile-population programming; and beneficiary-counting methodologies penalize the flexible systems pastoralists actually need. Climate finance reform, not climate finance access, is the binding constraint.

Box 1. A note on method

The Longoromit Dam case study (Figs. 2 & 3) draws on field research conducted by IWMI and partners in Kaabong District (Lobongia Sub-County) between 2023 and late 2025, including focused field visits. Methods comprised: (i) site observations and infrastructure inspection at the dam; (ii) semi-structured interviews with district water and environment officials, sub-county authorities, and Water User Committee members; (iii) focus group discussions with women, male elders and youth among Karimojong and resident Turkana users; (iv) review of district-level financial and planning documents; and (v) cross-checking with key informants in the Ministry of Water and Environment, NGOs, and Turkana County counterparts. Data were triangulated against earlier IWMI political economy fieldwork in the Lokok, Lokere, and Awoja catchments (Nicol, 2024). All informants gave informed verbal consent and are anonymized in this brief.

3. The Political Economy of Incoherence

Policy incoherence in the KTC unfolds across four interlocking dimensions: sectoral and spatial (both expressions of horizontal incoherence), vertical, and social. Each generates contradictions that undermine resilience, and each is sustained by an underlying political economy in which fragmentation is not simply a failure of coordination but a condition that distributes benefits to specific actors.

3.1 Sectoral and Spatial Incoherence (Horizontal)

Sectoral incoherence is the most visible. Uganda's National Water for Production policy privileges large infrastructure including big dams meant to reduce mobility, support irrigation, and underpin sedentarization (Nicol et al., 2025). Meanwhile, district authorities struggle daily to keep small-scale systems functioning, repairing hand pumps, securing spare parts, and mediating disputes over access to water and grazing between domestic and livestock users (Le Sève, 2018; Nicol, 2024). Mining concessions issued under the Mining Act 2022, covering nearly a quarter of Karamoja, add another layer of pressure on access to water: mining requires reliable water for washing and sorting gold and other minerals, while communities fear contamination (including from mercury), competition and the rising cost of water, especially during the dry season (Nicol, 2024). Yet water allocation policies have not evolved alongside this growing demand, and mining concessions are issued with little reference to water availability or pastoral mobility patterns. Sectoral actors pursue divergent objectives without coordination, despite catchment management organizations in the sub-region, resulting in inconsistent incentives and governance gaps (Nicol et al., 2025).

Spatial incoherence undermines effective planning. Water governance across Karamoja is organized around hydrological catchments—managed by the Lokok, Lokere, and Awoja CMOs (Nicol, 2024). Yet hydrology alone does not define how water is accessed, used or contested in dryland systems (Nicol et al., 2025). Pastoral mobility patterns criss-cross catchments and national borders; wildlife follows ecological gradients; mining concessions overlay grazing areas; and

1. Approximate exchange rate: USD 1 = KES 130 (July 2026). The KES 47 million and KES 2.1 billion figures are approximately USD 361,000 and USD 16 million, respectively.

political patronage networks run along district lines. These realities define a problemshed—a socio-political geography of water risk and interaction that differs markedly from hydrological boundaries (Nicol et al., 2025). Planning that ignores the problemshed risks addressing the wrong issues at the wrong scale, a mismatch that, in part, helps explain the uneven performance of catchment-based management across the region.

3.2 Vertical Incoherence

Vertical incoherence compounds these tensions. Uganda’s decentralized system mandates district governments to plan and manage water and sanitation services, but the financial architecture tells a different story. Over 90% of district water-sector funding flows through the conditional-grant system, earmarked for specific uses and controlled by central government (Le Sève, 2018). Districts plan five-year strategies with local priorities but largely lack the discretionary resources to carry them out (Le Sève, 2018; Nicol, 2024). This leaves them responsible for infrastructure they did not design or site, and accountable to communities without having the means to meet expectations (Nicol et al., 2025). The disjuncture is especially acute for larger dams: formally owned by central government, socially ‘owned’ by communities, yet, in practice, left in management ‘no man’s land’ (Nicol et al., 2025; Nicol, 2024). The struggle for effective governance at Longoromit Dam, for example—where neither monitoring nor maintenance was undertaken despite existing gauges—illustrates how vertical incoherence can transform district assets into potential community liabilities (Nicol, 2024).

At a basic level, there is inadequate consolidated data collection and monitoring for such large water structures to be effectively governed. Without accurate, up-to-date data on water availability, quality, and usage, it becomes difficult to develop coherent management and governance practices that are responsive to local needs (Nicol et al., 2025).

3.3 Social Incoherence: Gender, Generations, and Customary Institutions

Social incoherence pervades the governance landscape. Formal institutions—Water User Committees (WUCs), Catchment Management Organizations (CMOs), district technical offices—operate alongside customary systems that have long regulated mobility and resource sharing (Catley et al., 2021; Feyissa, 2020). Yet these systems are rarely acknowledged within formal planning frameworks (Nicol et al., 2025). The result is that systems designed on paper do not align with systems lived in practice, producing governance arrangements that are procedurally correct but can be socially vulnerable. Traditional water governance is the binding framework, rather than a cultural supplement to formal systems. Turkana *ekisil* rotation rules at communal wells (cattle morning, small stock midday, human collection evening) have sustained extraction within hydrological limits across at least five documented mega-droughts. Of 89 externally-designed water projects surveyed in Turkana West, none incorporated these rules into operations and maintenance procedures; and 73% had failed within three years (Mwangi & Ochieng, 2019; Haagsma & Moussa, 1993). Formal infrastructure that bypasses customary governance dismantles a working system and replaces it with a failing pastoral water management system.

Three illustrations from KTC fieldwork sharpen the point.

First, the institution of *etamam* — the negotiated practice through which Turkana and Karimojong communities arrange temporary access to grazing and water during drought — remains the operative system for managing cross-border resource access in much of the KTC (Feyissa, 2020; Stites et al., 2016). Field interviews in Kaabong and Moroto Districts indicate that most dry-season movements continue to be mediated through *etamam*-style envoy negotiations between elders rather than through any formal authority. Yet *etamam* appears nowhere in the relevant district plans, catchment management plans, or in the 2019 Uganda–Kenya MoU on reciprocal grazing as an operational mechanism. Where the state engages, it does so through security deployments and ad hoc disarmament campaigns that frequently disrupt elder-led negotiation cycles, undermining the institution that can prevent conflict.

Second, the gendered division of water labor is sharply at odds with the gender composition of formal water governance. Field evidence from Kaabong and Moroto Districts is consistent with regional patterns: women and girls undertake the overwhelming majority of household water collection, with one-way journeys of three to seven kilometers common in the dry season and dramatically longer where boreholes have failed. Women report risks of gender-based violence on these routes, particularly where water points are contested by armed actors or where dry-season concentration brings unfamiliar herders into closer proximity. Yet WUCs at Longoromit and at most surveyed boreholes remain heavily male-dominated, with women typically present as treasurers (a role mapped onto domestic responsibility for cash) rather than

as chairpersons or technical leads. Decisions about siting, repair priorities and user fees are therefore taken by those least exposed to the costs of failure (Catley et al., 2021; Nicol et al., 2025).

Third, generational incoherence is intensifying. Younger Karimojong and Turkana increasingly operate within cash economies shaped by mining, mobile money transfer and informal cross-border trade (Thujo, 2025). They negotiate access to water and pasture in ways that bypass elder-led *etamam* channels and that customary institutions were not designed to mediate. Where neither customary nor formal institutions adequately represent youth, water disputes drift toward the security apparatus by default — a dynamic visible at Longoromit and at several boreholes in the Karenga–Kaabong corridor.

Taken together, these three dynamics explain why an incremental “include communities” approach is insufficient. Coherence requires that customary mobility institutions, gendered water labor and the shifting political authority of youth all be recognized as constitutive features of water governance, not as mere wider social context around which to manage water.



FIGURE 2. 2018 Kaabong District project sign at Longoromit Dam, Kaabong, Uganda (Photo: Alan Nicol/IWMI).



FIGURE 3. Longoromit Dam, Kaabong, Uganda, in July 2024 (Photo: Alan Nicol/IWMI).

4. Incoherence Across the Border: What Turkana Reveals About Systemic Failure

Evidence from Turkana County across the border in Kenya—a border partly defined colonially along the Nile Basin watershed—reinforces and deepens the policy coherence failures identified in Karamoja (Thuo, 2025; Stites et al., 2016). The Kenya–Uganda border represents a lifeline embedded in centuries of reciprocal grazing agreements. Turkana herders have accessed Karamoja’s highland pastures during extreme droughts, while Karimojong communities can sometimes reciprocally utilize Turkana’s riverine resources during Uganda’s dry seasons (Stites et al., 2016; Catley et al., 2021). On the Kenyan side, water insecurity is acute and similarly driven not by absolute scarcity alone but by misaligned governance, fragmented authority, and development models that clash with pastoral realities (Catley et al., 2021; Thuo, 2025). Together, Karamoja and Turkana form a single socio-ecological problemshed, yet they are governed as administratively separate, institutionally siloed territories (Nicol et al., 2025).

Cross-border cooperation faces an institutional asymmetry. Turkana County, under Kenya’s devolved system, holds direct mandate over water services, ASAL programming, and county climate funds. Karamoja districts, operating under Uganda’s more centralized framework, must channel most infrastructure decisions through Kampala ministries. A Karamoja Cluster Water Compact must therefore engage at two levels — county-to-district for operational coordination, and Nairobi-to-Kampala for ratification of binding protocols — or risk producing agreements that Karamoja signatories lack authority to implement.

The Turkana evidence presented in this brief draws principally on Thuo (2025), which we triangulate against published work on Turkana pastoralism and cross-border mobility (Catley et al., 2021; Stites et al., 2016; Feyissa, 2020).

Pastoral mobility remains the backbone of resilience across Turkana. An estimated 150,000 Turkana herders regularly move across the Uganda–Kenya border in response to rainfall variability, while Kaabong and Moroto Districts alone sometimes host tens of thousands of cattle and Turkana during dry seasons (Thuo, 2025). These movements are not opportunistic or chaotic—though chaos may arise from group resource-control efforts and petty cattle thefts—rather, they are frequently structured and negotiated.

At the same time, water and land policies on both sides of the border continue to treat mobility as a system to be controlled rather than governed (Nicol et al., 2025). Within Uganda, the absence of a Karamoja-specific provision in the Land Act 1998 creates a significant gap. Unlike other regions, Karamoja’s socio-cultural and environmental context requires a tailored approach to land ownership and usage given the centrality of transhumance. Without this, the region’s distinct needs are left unaddressed within national legal frameworks. A dedicated statutory or constitutional provision is essential for equitable and sustainable land governance in Karamoja and is taken up directly in Section 7. Catchment-based planning frameworks, while technically sound, fail to account for these lived patterns of access and reciprocity, reproducing what Turkana analyses describe as a persistent mismatch between hydrological logic and social reality (Thuo, 2025; Nicol et al., 2025). The consequences are visible in water investments across Turkana County. Despite decades of donor and government spending on boreholes, dams and small irrigation schemes, water insecurity remains stubbornly high and affects over half of households in both dry and wet seasons (Thuo, 2025).

Irrigation schemes at sites such as Turkwel have collapsed not because of technical failure alone, but because benefit-sharing arrangements were unclear, governance roles contested, and community engagement superficial (Thuo, 2025). As in Karamoja, infrastructure has been delivered faster than institutions capable of managing it, and, as the Longoromit example shows, the government is either unwilling or unable to respond effectively to local feedback (Nicol, 2024; Nicol et al., 2025).

5. Elite Capture, Securitization, and the Politics of Water

The Turkana and Karamoja evidence sharpens the political economy analysis of incoherence. Securitization around water infrastructure—including the dynamics observed at Longoromit Dam—undermines community authority and weakens accountability (Nicol et al., 2025; Thuo, 2025). Traditional dispute-resolution mechanisms are formally recognized under Kenya’s 2010 Constitution, yet remain poorly integrated into operational water governance, leaving customary institutions visible but powerless.

Economic and ideational power further distort outcomes. Development narratives continue to privilege hardware—including boreholes and dams—over governance and the establishment of participation mechanisms, operation and maintenance, and negotiated access. At the same time, artisanal mining, oil exploration, transport corridors and the monetization of livelihoods place new, largely unregulated demands on water (Thuo, 2025; Nicol, 2024). Younger Turkana and Karimojong increasingly operate within cash economies shaped by mining, mobile money and informal markets for goods and services, while water governance frameworks remain locked in older rural service-delivery models.

Elite capture compounds these pressures. Turkana analyses (Thuo, 2025) document how county-level politics, procurement practices and patronage networks divert water investments away from the most vulnerable. Similar dynamics are evident in Karamoja, suggesting that vertical incoherence is mirrored horizontally across the border: decentralization has shifted authority without adequately redistributing power, transparency or fiscal discretion. A reconsideration of this power imbalance in water resources governance should be included in future programming both sides of the border.

6. How Incoherence Produces Failure

The consequences of policy incoherence manifest across Karamoja's water infrastructure. At Arachek Dam, water extraction for road construction became entangled in local political competition, with irregular permit issuance and informal payments shaping outcomes—and similar dynamics were witnessed at Longoromit recently². At Kobebe Dam, conflicting expectations between herders, domestic users and wildlife authorities created conditions in which violence has intermittently flared during drought years (Nicol, 2024).

At Longoromit Dam, the near-failure of the reservoir to fill—despite adequate rainfall—occurred not simply because of hydrological factors but also because of institutional ones (Nicol, 2024). No entity routinely monitored inflows, assessed leakage, or enforced by-laws on valve use. Community members disagreed on the causes of the dam's decline, underscoring the absence of shared data and accountability mechanisms (Nicol et al., 2025). Together, these features constitute an emerging pathology of infrastructure built without coherent governance, maintained without clarity on rules and roles, and used without consensus on rights and responsibilities.

These patterns extend to smaller systems as well. Boreholes often fail under dry-season stress when livestock are driven to them after valley tanks dry out (Nicol, 2024). Herders may move rapidly from one hand pump to the next, leaving broken systems behind because responsibility for repair is not clearly defined. Communities then impose user fees on outsiders in desperate attempts to manage scarcity. Political actors promise new water points in exchange for support; district engineers triage emergencies without adequate budgets; and Water User Committees struggle to collect contributions in contexts where water is widely seen as a free resource and user communities may be complex, constantly evolving and ill-defined (Le Sève, 2018; Nicol et al., 2025).

Climate change amplifies these pressures, changing rainfall patterns and intensifying competition around perennial sources. Under such conditions, incoherent policy structures may actively generate vulnerability. Across the Karamoja-Turkana Complex, infrastructure failure follows a consistent pattern. Dams, boreholes, and irrigation schemes are constructed in the name of resilience, only to become occasional sites of contestation, exclusion, and decay. In Arachek and Kobebe, as in Longoromit on the Ugandan side and Turkwel on the Kenyan side, breakdown occurs not at the point of construction but at the interface between use, authority, and accountability.

Longoromit Dam illustrates this vividly, but it is not exceptional. Turkana County presents parallel evidence: irrigation schemes abandoned once water levels drop; boreholes rendered inoperable due to lack of maintenance; wetlands degraded as upstream decisions fall outside local control; and water points captured by powerful actors during drought (Thuo, 2025). In both contexts, communities are held responsible for managing assets they neither fully own nor control, while national and county institutions retain formal authority but lack sustained presence. The result is a repeating cycle: infrastructure investment followed by governance vacuum; short-term stability followed by renewed vulnerability; and community-level conflict and vulnerability exacerbated by institutional inertia, if not silence (Nicol et al., 2025; Thuo, 2025).

At Longoromit Dam in Lobongia Sub-County, the story is more granular—and revealing. Longoromit was constructed in 2012 as a flagship “water for production” investment intended to support livestock, domestic use, irrigation and, at one point, fisheries (Nicol, 2024). At its height, it served communities on both sides of the Uganda-Kenya border, including Turkana pastoralists. Today it still holds some water, far below original capacity, but its governance has significantly faltered. This has little to do with lack of water alone, but reflects something of an institutional vacuum created by misaligned mandates, and unenforced authority, alongside almost non-existent financial support (Nicol, 2024; Nicol et al., 2025).

Formally, the dam is owned and periodically maintained by the Ministry of Water and Environment (MWE). Practically, it is used by pastoralists, surrounding communities, road contractors, wildlife and—critically—the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF), with a nearby detachment among regular resource users. Socially, it is expected to be managed by a Water User Committee. Yet in reality, none of these actors has both mandate and means to govern the dam and therefore prevent its slide into disrepair.

2. Field report, Kaabong District, November 2025; Lucky Sarafina Nakiru.

7. Towards Greater Coherence: Specific Policy Asks

Policy coherence is a means, not an end. Built on the wrong paradigm—for example, sedentarization through irrigation—it can entrench the vulnerabilities it aims to address. The central question, therefore, is what kind of pastoral development coherence should advance. This brief calls for coherence around climate-resilient water systems that sustain mobility and communal governance, rather than infrastructure-led approaches that drive sedentarization.

This section sets out specific revisions to the six Ugandan policy instruments identified in Section 1 (Track 1) and to the bilateral framework with Kenya (Track 2). Each ask is addressed to a named lead institution, with supporting actors and an indicative timeline. The asks are designed to be directly usable in advocacy and negotiation with Government of Uganda decision-makers, including those convened under the Third Karamoja Integrated Development Plan (KIDP) (2021/22-2025/26) coordination architecture led by the Office of the Prime Minister.

7.1 Track 1 — Uganda-Domestic Policy Revisions

Policy instrument	Specific ask	Lead and supporting decision-makers	Coherence dimension	Timeline
National Water for Production policy and investment criteria	Revise WfP investment criteria to require a formal Governance Readiness Assessment (mandate clarity, O&M financing plan, monitoring system, community participation structure) before any new dam above a defined size threshold is approved or commissioned.	Lead: MWE (Directorate of Water Resources Management; Water for Production Department). Support: MoFPED (capital budget gatekeeping); OPM-KIDP3; development partners (World Bank, AfDB, EU) as financiers.	Vertical & horizontal	Short term (policy directive: 0–12 months); ongoing application
Conditional-grant architecture for the district water sector	Restructure the District Water and Sanitation Conditional Grant to include a ring-fenced minimum discretionary O&M component (suggested floor: 20% of the grant) that districts can deploy on locally identified maintenance priorities, with simplified reporting.	Lead: MoFPED (Directorate of Budget) and MoLG. Support: MWE; Uganda Local Governments Association (ULGA); Office of the Auditor General; Parliament's Committee on Local Government and Public Accounts.	Vertical	Medium term (FY budget cycle); legislative anchoring 1–3 years
Mining Act 2022 and concession-licensing system	Require joint MEMD–MWE water-use and pastoral-mobility assessments as a binding component of EIAs for all new mining concessions in Karamoja, with district concurrence and CMO sign-off.	Lead: MEMD (Directorate of Geological Survey and Mines) jointly with MWE. Support: NEMA; district environment offices; OPM-KIDP3; Parliament's Committee on Natural Resources.	Horizontal (sectoral)	Short term (interim guideline); medium term (legislative amendment)

Policy instrument	Specific ask	Lead and supporting decision-makers	Coherence dimension	Timeline
Land Act 1998 — absence of Karamoja-specific provision	Introduce a Karamoja-specific land governance instrument (statutory amendment or schedule under the Land Act, with Cabinet-level Karamoja Land Policy) recognizing communal tenure and transhumance, protecting communal grazing reserves from commodification, and integrating customary institutions into formal land administration.	Lead: MLHUD (Department of Land Administration) and OPM-KIDP. Support: Uganda Land Commission; Karamoja Parliamentary Group; district land boards; civil society (LANDnet, KDF).	Horizontal (sectoral) & social	Medium to long term (1–5 years)
CMO frameworks for Lokok, Lokere, and Awoja	Mandate that Catchment Management Plans incorporate pastoral mobility corridors, mining concession overlays, and a problemshed analysis annex; require annual joint planning forums between CMOs and District Local Governments, with synchronized five-year cycles; set minimum quotas for women, youth, and pastoralist representation on CMO sub-committees.	Lead: MWE (Directorate of Water Resources Management; Kyoga Water Management Zone). Support: District Local Governments of Kaabong, Karenga, Kotido, Moroto, Napak, Nakapiripirit, Amudat, Abim, and Nabilatuk; Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development.	Horizontal (spatial) & social	Short term (planning forums); medium term (CMP revisions)
WUC governance and gender/youth representation	Issue a binding MWE directive setting minimum quotas for women (≥40%), youth, and pastoralist representation on Water User Committees and resourcing their participation through district facilitation budgets or similar; publish annual compliance data.	Lead: MWE jointly with the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development. Support: District Water Offices; women's and youth networks; CSOs.	Social	Short term (0–12 months)

7.2 Track 2 — Bilateral Uganda–Kenya Policy Revisions

Track 2 asks address the cross-border policy architecture that no single government can revise unilaterally. They are written for joint action by the Governments of Uganda and Kenya, with IGAD's Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN) and the IGAD Centre for Pastoral Areas and Livestock Development (ICPALD) as facilitators. Each ask maps to one of the five cross-border lessons in Box 2.

Instrument or mechanism	Specific ask (mapped to Box 2 lesson)	Lead and supporting decision-makers	Timeline
2019 Uganda–Kenya MoU on reciprocal grazing	Review and renew the MoU with binding operational annexes covering: (i) a joint seasonal water-availability assessment protocol [Lesson 5]; (ii) formal recognition and procedural anchoring of etamam-style elder negotiations [Lessons 1 & 4]; (iii) designated cross-border mobility corridors and water points [Lesson 1]; and (iv) a joint dispute-arbitration mechanism with traditional councils [Lesson 4].	Lead: Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Uganda) and Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs (Kenya), jointly with MWE/WRA. Support: IGAD/CEWARN/ICPALD; OPM-KIDP; Turkana County Government; Karamoja district peace committees.	Short to medium term (renewal: 0–18 months; annexes 1–3 years)
KTC Policy Coherence Platform	Establish a standing KTC Policy Coherence Platform under joint MWE–Council of Governors (Kenya) chairmanship, convening district/county leaders, elder fora, women's and youth representatives, and technical agencies on an annual planning cycle; mandate that annual investment decisions reference Platform outputs [Lesson 2 — problemshed planning].	Co-lead: MWE (Uganda) and Council of Governors (Kenya). Support: IGAD; IWMI; OPM-KIDP; donors (FCDO, EU, GIZ).	Medium term (1–2 years to establish; ongoing)
KTC Water and Mobility Outlook	Produce a twice-yearly Water and Mobility Outlook synthesizing climate forecasts, hydrological data, mobility assessments, and governance risks, to inform low-regret pre-drought decisions [Lesson 5 — institutional anchoring of agreements].	Lead: national universities with the Uganda National Meteorological Authority and Kenya Meteorological Department; ICPAC. Support: WRA, MWE, CMOs.	Short to medium term (pilot 0–12 months; institutionalize 1–3 years)
KTC Water Compact	Negotiate a binding KTC Water Compact between Uganda, Kenya, and Turkana County, including: shared monitoring protocols for cross-border dams (Longoromit, Kobebe), and joint arbitration through traditional councils [Lessons 3 & 4 — elite capture and securitization].	Lead: foreign-affairs ministries (UG/KE) with IGAD facilitation. Support: traditional councils; MWE, WRA; Turkana County Government; Karamoja Parliamentary Group.	Long term (3–7 years)

Instrument or mechanism	Specific ask (mapped to Box 2 lesson)	Lead and supporting decision-makers	Timeline
Cross-border digital and community-based monitoring	Deploy a shared digital and community-based monitoring system covering dam levels, borehole performance, grazing pressure, and water-quality indicators across the KTC, with open data access to districts/counties and CMOs [Lesson 3 — transparency against elite capture].	Lead: MWE/WRA jointly. Support: districts/counties, WUCs, mobile-network partners (MTN, Safaricom).	Short to medium term

Box 2. Cross-border lessons mapped to specific asks

Lesson 1. Mobility is governance-critical, not residual. Attempts to sedentarize pastoralists through water infrastructure have repeatedly failed. Ask: 2019 MoU annex on cross-border mobility corridors and etamam recognition (Track 2, row 1).

Lesson 2. Catchments are necessary, but insufficient. Hydrological planning that ignores political economy and negotiated access misfires. Ask: KTC Policy Coherence Platform with problemshd planning mandate (Track 2, row 2); CMP revision in Track 1 row 5.

Lesson 3. Elite capture is a systemic risk. Devolved systems can reproduce exclusion without transparency and fiscal discretion. Ask: conditional grant reform with discretionary O&M floor (Track 1, row 2); cross-border digital monitoring (Track 2, row 5).

Lesson 4. Security actors shape water outcomes. Securitization around water points undermines community governance. Ask: KTC Water Compact (Track 2, row 4); MoU arbitration mechanism (Track 2, row 1).

Lesson 5. Cross-border agreements fail without institutional anchoring. Resource-sharing arrangements remain fragile unless backed by mandates, budgets, and joint monitoring. Ask: MoU operational annexes and Water and Mobility Outlook (Track 2, rows 1 and 3).

7.3 Underlying Principles

Behind these specific asks sit four principles that should guide implementation. First, governance must be financed before infrastructure: no large new water asset should be commissioned without a costed O&M and accountability plan. Second, mobility is a structural feature of dryland resilience, and planning frameworks must accommodate it. Third, customary institutions — especially elder-led negotiation, women’s water authority and youth participation — must be recognized as constitutive of water governance, not peripheral to it. Fourth, cross-border problems require cross-border instruments with binding annexes.

8. Unlocking Opportunity Through Coherence

While today's challenges are significant, the KTC also offers a unique opportunity to pioneer innovative approaches to water governance. The KTC Policy Coherence Platform proposed in Section 7 would provide the region's first dedicated mechanism for aligning water, land, mobility, and development policies, bringing together district leaders in Uganda, Turkana County authorities in Kenya, plus elders' fora, women's representatives, youth, and technical agencies (Nicol, 2024). Its annual planning cycle would integrate climate outlooks, mobility assessments, water availability data and political economy analysis, reducing duplication and supporting harmonized investment decisions.

The Water and Mobility Outlook, also proposed in Section 7, would equip districts and national ministries to make low-regret decisions under uncertainty, strengthening preparedness for drought cycles or infrastructure failures. The KTC Water Compact would underpin reciprocal access agreements with binding protocols and arbitration through recognized cross-border traditional chiefs and councils. Investments in digital and community-based monitoring would fill persistent data gaps, enabling real-time tracking of dam levels, borehole performance, grazing pressure and water quality. When paired with stronger and better understood governance rules and long-term capacity building, these instruments could help transform infrastructure provision into a more resilient anchor for development.

9. Conclusion

Karamoja and Turkana's water problems cannot be addressed by engineering alone. They are fundamentally governance problems, rooted in incoherence across policies, institutions, and social systems—vertical, horizontal, and social. The region's vulnerability is therefore not only ecological but institutional, and so too are its opportunities for transformation.

This brief has translated that diagnosis into a specific, named set of policy asks: revisions to Uganda's Water for Production investment criteria; restructuring of the conditional-grant architecture; binding inter-ministerial assessments under the Mining Act; a Karamoja-specific provision under the Land Act; revisions to the CMO frameworks for Lokok, Lokere, and Awoja; and renewal of the 2019 Uganda–Kenya MoU with operational annexes. Each ask names its lead institution and indicative timeline. The brief therefore functions both as analysis and as engagement document.

In an era of accelerating change, the costs of incoherence are rising. With deliberate action and sustained collaboration across the Uganda–Kenya border, the Karamoja–Turkana Complex can become a model for integrated, climate-resilient transboundary drylands governance.

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