‘Mental drought’ afflicts Uganda’s cattle corridor

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'Mental drought' afflicts Uganda's cattle corridor

It's all about attitude, says scholar of the problems encountered in semi-arid areas

BY ANTHONY EGERU

Diagonally from south western to north eastern Uganda is an eco-region commonly referred to as the "cattle corridor". It is Uganda's semi-arid region. The region is synonymous with extreme climatic conditions, particularly drought and intermittent floods.

However, drought has made this eco-region more of a resounding crisis region from time to time; partly because its peoples are pastoralists and agro-pastoralists highly dependent on rain-fed production systems. Thus, in the event of a drought, livestock herders and farmers are often in crisis mode.

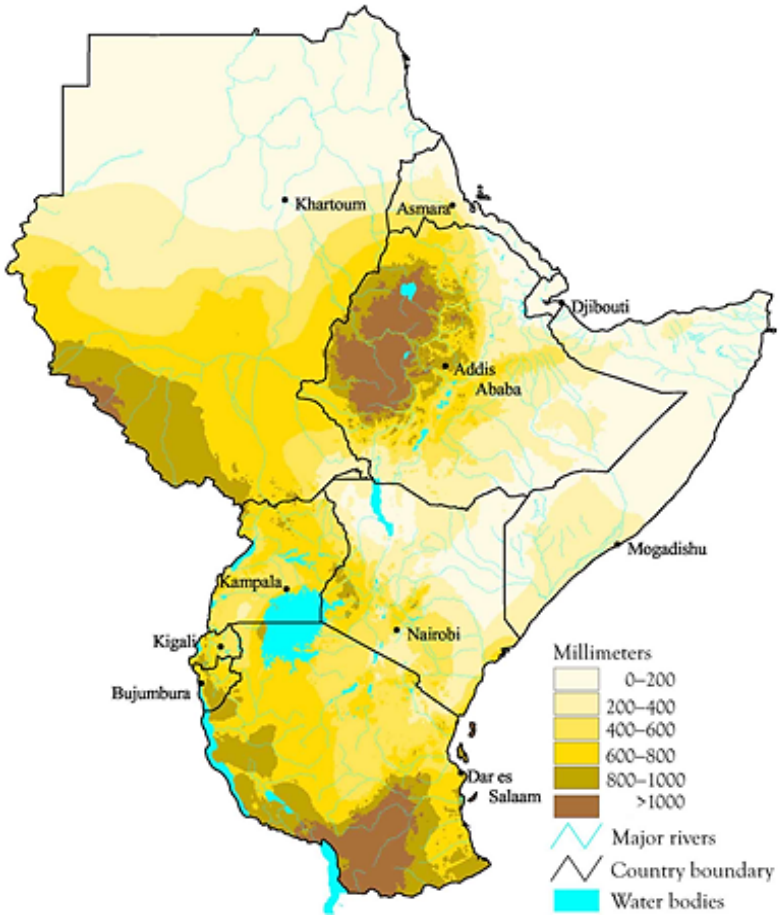
How do we define drought? Drought can be considered as an extended period during which fresh water availability and accessibility is below normal, attributable to unfavourable distribution of rainfall, temperature, soil moisture and wind. There are different forms of drought, namely, meteorological drought, agricultural drought and hydrological drought.

A number of factors may work jointly to create drought conditions in an area. These may include high-velocity wind for an extended period; high, above-average temperatures for prolonged periods; uneven distribution of rainfall characterised by long periods of below-average rains and low soil moisture content with uneven soil moisture distribution.

Uganda's semi-arid region is essentially not rainfall deficient. As a matter of fact, the overall mean annual rainfall distribution in the cattle corridor and most of Uganda is far higher than the mean annual rainfall in most semi-arid regions of East Africa and the Horn of Africa.

Why then does the semi-arid region of Uganda get into crisis mode whenever there is a dry spell? The blame is often heaped on the poor rainfall distribution, high evapotranspiration and recently, climate change has become the buzz word for this eco-region. However, sporadic rainfall and high evapotranspiration are known characteristics of these eco-regions.

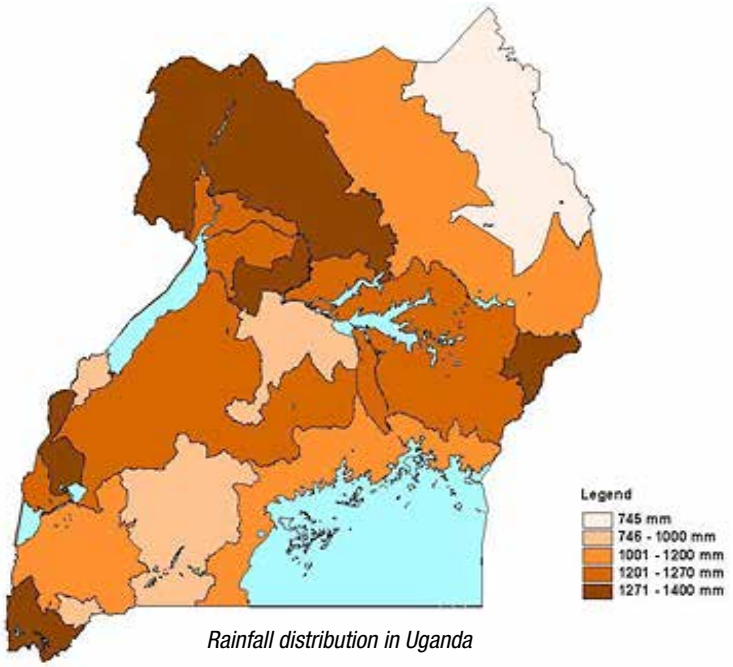
As such, the crisis modes in these regions can be attributed to the mental architecture of the people at different decision-making levels. "Mental drought" thus describes the lack of systematic preparedness, mitigation, response and learning from past events to better tackle future droughts. From the household to the national and regional levels of decision-making, there is a compounding and increasing complexity of "mental drought". It is therefore a systemic challenge that exposes fundamental weaknesses at institutional level.



Rainfall distribution in East Africa and the Horn of Africa

The "mental drought" in Uganda's cattle corridor can be illustrated using four examples:

- There is abundant herbaceous forage during the rainy periods. However, most of this biomass is allowed to grow into fuel that is burnt during the dry season, even as the cattle keepers crisscross the district in search of pasture. Bulking this grass into hay does not require any advanced technology or costs. Holding on to the notion that "nature will provide", and continuing with seasonal migration despite reduced grazing land is an indicator of "mental drought".
- Storm discharge is not tapped and utilised but allowed to degenerate into floods. The water usage techniques applied do not allow for increased water conservation for prolonged usage on-site. Further, some of the interventions in the form of dams/ponds constructed by



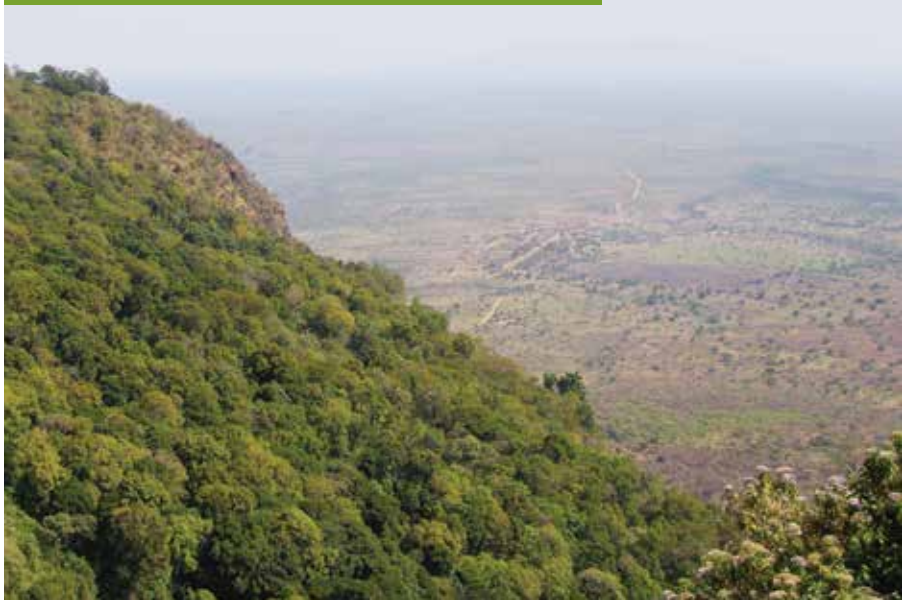
Rainfall distribution in Uganda

Scattered vegetation in Kiruhura, a district in the cattle corridor. (Photo: Gerald Eilu)

the government and/or non-governmental organisations are not designed for multi-purpose use. In addition, some of these structures are so poorly designed that they are more like evaporation pans.

- Despite drought being a slow on-set hazard, the response is normally characterised by superficial conclusions and a "quick fix attitude". For example, food insecurity in the cattle corridor is often attributed to drought but is this reality? The challenge of food insecurity in this region could stem from poor infrastructure and connectivity set-up, poor soil nutrient composition, low agricultural in-put access and use, and/or land degradation. Thus, the lack of systematic diagnosis and analysis of the challenges in the cattle corridor leads to snappy conclusions on a "common enemy" - drought.
- There is a conflict between preferred interventions verses policy and practice. On the one hand, the government, through the different ministries (that is, Ministry of Water and Environment, Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Fisheries and Ministry of Disasters Preparedness) seeks to promote initiatives such as irrigation that are aimed at alleviating the persistent drought challenges in the region. On the other hand, the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development imposes taxes on the necessary in-puts, making them unaffordable for small-holder farmers. This lack of coordination within government agencies exposes a mental drought at higher levels of decision-making.

View from Mt Kadam across Nakapiripirit towards Mt Moroto. The Karamoja plains are among Uganda's driest areas. But all is relative and in the mind. Uganda's semi-arid region receives annual rainfall that is high enough to allow for stable pastoral and agro-pastoral production all year round. The situation calls for a change of attitude, says Anthony Egeru. (Photo: Gerald Eilu)



Moving forward

It is evident that Uganda's semi-arid region receives annual rainfall that is high enough to allow for stable pastoral and agro-pastoral production all year round. Addressing the drought challenges in the region requires a systematic dismantling of the "mental drought". This has to be undertaken at different levels, using different skills and approaches.

A change of attitude is required, moving away from the "business as usual" way of doing things, to recognising the fact that systematic proactive action is needed to deal with actual and perceived drought events. This however requires transformation at various levels of decision-making, from household to national level. For example, systematic mapping, identification and diagnosis of challenges occurring in the cattle corridor could allow for easing of the cause of the problem, tackle the drought challenge and help dismantle the "mental drought" phenomenon.

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