Background to Cross-Border Conflict in the Karamoja Cluster

I was born and raised in Nyangatom Woreda, in the area near the Omo river in Southwest Ethiopia. I have worked in many organisations starting with a local CBO and working as a national peace expert employed by GIZ before I joined CEWARN. I grew up in an environment where there is endemic violence. The unrelenting conflicts motivated me to work for peace organisations in order to help my community.

The Turkana and all the other groups around the Nyangatom always clash. The Nyangatom resided in the disputed land called the Illemi Triangle before they were pushed into Ethiopia due to friction with the Dassanech and Turkana. The dynamics of conflict in this area are very complex and are not limited to one cause; most involve a combination of competition for pasture, cattle rustling, and territorial disputes. Some of the lands are our people’s traditional pasture, but now the Turkana occupy it so we no longer have access to it.

Admassu Lokali (Interview)

Admasu Lokali served as a field monitor in Nyangatom woreda, South Omo zone, Ethiopia. He is a Peace and Human Rights activist in the lower Omo valley.
The Nyangatom moved out of the Illemi triangle around 1980, after the Kenyan government bombed the locals. I remember when President Moi came to the area called Kibish and told those present to process Kenya identity cards but the Nyangatom said we already have Ethiopian IDs, why do we need to have two identities? The Turkana militia then began to attack the locals in Khalata, Natodomeri and Kanyeremo. A unit called the KPR (Kenya Police Reserves) also stole cattle and the militias killed many people. The Toposa and Nyangatom made an alliance to revenge attack the Turkana in Lokamrigna and other places I no longer remember by name. After the conflict started, it spread to the Toposa, Dassanech, Mursi, the Surma and other communities in Ethiopia.

Kenya's General Service Unit paramilitary deployed there after the Ethiopian government requested the Kenya government to handle the issue. The Kenyan government allowed the GSU to attack the local communities in the Illemi triangle. Some 100 Nyangatom were killed and they used a helicopter to herd many animals away. This is what we were told by the elders who were there at the time.

After this, the Nyangatom split into two groups. One moved to South Sudan to join their kin already there and the other moved to a place called Kangatong in the Omo area of Ethiopia. Other people from both the Toposa and Nyangatom fled across the Kenyan side of the border. Because they were clashing with the local Dassanetch after two years the Nyangatom returned to Kibish.

The Illemi Triangle is a disputed territory where inter-ethnic conflict is a real problem. The positive diplomatic relationship between Ethiopia and Kenya was also a factor in the events forcing the Nyangatom out of Illemi when it came under de facto control by the Kenyans, who claim it because the British administered the area from Kenya during the colonial era.

There has been instability in this region since that time but one of the worst periods was the famine of 1984, which catalysed a new wave of conflict across the cluster. The Ugandan Karamojong describe this as beginning of the “white period” when famine, cholera and the rinderpest epidemic ravaged the area. Many cattle perished and an estimated 25 per cent of the population was wiped out. The UN came to describe the combination of famine, disease and underdevelopment as the Karamoja Syndrome.

The raiding has destabilised Nyangatom since 1988. Instability of this sort further aggravates tensions among the communities in our area because there was rarely harmony among the groups before. The conflicts escalate in Kibish and Lokichoggio when the Turkana raid the
Toposa then both the Toposa and Nyangatom counter raid the Turkana. The communities in South Sudan, southern Ethiopia and Kenya then attack herdsmen in Uganda like the Dodoth. The conflict that started at that time was a function of complicated historical factors and continued for years.

The Nyangatom and Toposa call themselves the grandfathers or close brothers. The Turkana and Nyangatom also do the same but the tensions between them are deep rooted. These communities all originated in Uganda and used to be part of the Karamojong. They included the Turkana, Jie, Toposa, Nyangatom and other smaller groups. The relationship was determined by their migrations. After the Turkana separated from the group, the Toposa and Nyangatom remained in a close relationship. They continue to form alliances because their languages are related and culturally the Nyangatom and the Toposa are almost indistinguishable.

But don’t they tend to co-operate when faced by another outside force, like the intervention by Moi’s Kenyan government you mentioned above?

Since the time they split up and migrated, there has been competition among these Ateker speaking groups; one always wants to dominate the other. Competition is particularly fierce between the Turkana and the Toposa due to their population and their power, political or otherwise.

Although the Nyangatom are not large in number, they are strong warriors who like fighting. The Nyangatom and Toposa say the Turkana want to occupy our territory so we must constantly defend the land from their incursions. The Jie and the Dodoth feel the same way. The general feeling among the Ateker is that the Turkana are very arrogant. Historically, the Turkana are dominant, aggressive, and not liked by their neighbours, especially their sworn enemy, the Pokot. There is a song the Turkana sing when they come: “The men have come to take their cattle back, you boys go and drink porridge.”

The Matheniko [Karamojong] are perceived in the same way as the Turkana. They were the first to get AK-47s in 1979. They are also seen as arrogant, and sometimes proclaim unity with the Turkana. But the Turkana and other clans like the Sepek don’t see eye to eye and the Matheniko exploit this from time to time by playing them against each other.

Going back fifteen years or so, the Turkana were not so aggressive. There was a time when even the Dodoth managed to ambush them and take many Turkana guns. They enjoyed good relations with the Kenyan government back then. But during President Mwai Kibaki’s time, Turkana politicians pro-
cured guns and ammunition that were used in the raiding against the Nyangatom and Dassanech. Before this, there was a period when the Nyangatom and Toposa were the aggressors because they had automatic weapons acquired from the SPLA (Sudan Peoples’ Liberation Army) during the civil war in South Sudan. They were frequently raiding and killing the Turkana, although this has decreased due to intervention from the national and the Turkana County governments. The role of the state, however, varies according to circumstances.

We had a chat with someone from the African Union about these issues. He said they consider cattle rustling to be just a cultural activity yet we are talking about conflicts over livestock worth millions of dollars. So what rules are we using when other interest groups, including some military people, are involved? When raids happen now there are trucks waiting to transport animals to abattoirs in Nairobi and Kampala and other major towns.

Now even people from towns participate in raids. For example, there are cases when students who are unable to pay their school fees decide to steal animals and sell them in the market to raise money. Sometimes businessmen or powerful chiefs in the village organise youth groups for raiding in order to exploit the profits from the cattle trade.

Animal diseases are another trigger for Nyangatom and Turkana violence. Sometimes cattle contract contagious diseases when they migrate from place to place. In 1999 the Nyangatom migrated to Karamatong in Surmaland. There was abundant grass and the Nyangatom resided there with the consent of the Surma community. Then anthrax broke out and many animals died. People then started to die from eating contaminated meat. After this the Nyangatom decided to leave Surmaland and resolved they would no longer go beyond their own territory, except to parts of Toposa country and sometimes to the vicinity of Kibish so they could avoid contact with the Turkana.

This is necessary because the conflict starts again whenever they migrate close to the Turkana. Envy is a problem for all three groups here. When they see herds of healthy cattle, the youth group become excited and begin mobilising to take them away. When the Nyangatom and Toposa come to Sepeng the Turkana prepare to raid. When the Turkana move away from Lokamarinya to an area called Makaronya, the Nyangatom and Toposa see the cattle and prepare to take them. The practice is mutual and things are complicated. What makes the conflict complex is that the Nyangatom and Toposa take cattle stolen in Kenya and hide them with their kin in Ethiopia. The animals circulate from one group to the next.
Since animals are the means of subsistence, when animals die, famine follows. In 1994, there was a large drought leading to famine across the region. It resulted in many succumbing from hunger in Nyangatom as well as in Turkana. But there were good relations between the Turkana and the Nyangatom at the time. Turkana used to bring maize from Kitale market and the Nyangatom used to take maize from Jinka to Topisede, and this allowed both groups to exchange supplies and get by. In the cases where people cannot travel for long distances they used to cultivate grains such as sorghum. So there is famine.

How have famines and conflict affected local livelihoods?

Not substantially. There are Nyangatom living around the Omo River who cultivate in the margins when the river retreats, although what they harvest is not enough for the whole community. I estimate close to half of the Toposa are now farmers. They cultivate sorghum along the hills of Naganachar and ferry it to the Nyangatom when there is famine, and the Nyangatom do the same for the Toposa when there is famine in their land. But the conflict always intensifies the problem because you cannot go to the market.

The Nyangatom are not involved in fishing but many Dassanech are now fishermen. Fishing has become a source of new hostilities on the border because of the stealing of nets, boats, and other equipment. Over the past year five boats have been stolen from the Turkana leading to revenge attacks that have killed seventeen Dassenech fishermen. The Turkana say that some of the fishing points the Dassanech use belong to Kenya, so the Dassanech should not use them, and the same is true of the Dassanech who want to deny Turkana access to certain spots across the border.

The same people who are exporting fish without the two governments’ knowledge are behind the new frictions on the lake. There are some investors who have certificates from the central government to export fish to Addis Ababa and other towns and it is only those people who are licensed to buy fish from fishermen. But on the Kenyan side there are Somali who buy fish from Dassanech and the Turkana to sell in Kenya and export to Uganda.

The Kenya government deployed marines in the lakeside to control the illegal fishing in the lake and there have been talks with the chief administrator of the South Omo zone to establish joint Ethiopia-Kenya patrols. Last month the zone administration on the Ethiopian side carried out an assessment to define legal and illegal fishermen.
With all these different challenges, how do you begin to build the basic infrastructure for peace work?

It is difficult to cope with conflict in general, and particularly so when it involves the pastoral communities who are always mobile. The monitors share information with each other to mobilise community leaders when there is an incident. We use the local elders and we are working with the youth groups who are the key actors in terms of triggering conflicts. Of course it is difficult to access the youth since they are always on the move with the herds. There is a project funded by the Rapid Response Fund from 2010 that we use to organise dialogue among the conflicting communities.

We also organise conversations among herders from different communities to discuss on how to share natural resources in a peaceful way. We hold exchanges among the peace committees on each side of the border so committees can learn to negotiate using traditional mechanisms. These are called Ar- bor peace negotiations. The Arbor trainers are locals who explain key procedures to the elders from both the Nyangatom and Dassanech so they can go and use it in their area. The challenge with the elders is that normally they are biased when negotiating for peace. The Arbor people are trained to remain neutral during these meetings.

The flow of arms from South Sudan is another difficult issue. Although as field monitors we always communicate with the Woreda and zone administrations, it is beyond the capacity of the local administrators to deal with this problem. The Nyangatom and Toposa who joined SPLA came back with the guns to sell to the cattle herders. Now everybody has access to guns and controlling the illegal arms is difficult.

Are there any examples you could give us of these peace efforts bearing fruit?

The CEWARN Mechanism, in my opinion, is an excellent initiative because the information gathered from the ground is based on the reality. But after this information is reported to the CEWERU, the response is often slow. Often, there is no immediate response from the concerned parties, be it the government or the local administration. As a field monitor I gather information from the elders, women groups, youths, local administrators and also I go to the spot where incidents happen. After I collect and report the details, people on the ground expect that I will come up with some kind of response. When it does not happen we can lose their trust. When I return later and say “help me with this information because we need it”, they say, “you always take information but then there is no response; you don’t bring us solutions”.
There is a new CEWARN strategic plan but at this time I am not aware of the details. It is important more attention is devoted to enhancing the response mechanisms. The reason I am saying this is because there is a lot of information sent by the field monitors and the local administration that require action on higher levels of the system. The CEWERUs of the member states need to work together better and meet more frequently.

I am new here and have only been working as the field monitor for this area this past year, but I have a lot of experience doing peace work. Experience directs me to emphasise that any new strategy will be of little importance to those of us working in the field until it is implemented. The role of the field monitor should be strengthened. I think the position can be given more scope for undertaking activities with the local peace committees and the government administration. Rather than just reporting, they should be empowered to help deal with the situation.

We are making progress. The Nyangatom now live in peace with the Hamar and there is even intermarriage now. The same has been replicated with the Dassanech and another group called the Kara in the South Omo zone. We have tried to extend the practice to Surma but due to the remoteness of the area where they reside we could not follow up the issue. Even so, they and the other small communities are willing to live in peace with the Nyangatom and their neighbours.