Managing Cross-Border Conflicts in Djibouti

I have been working with the National Research Institute (NRI) since the end of 2006 in my capacity as the CEWARN Country Coordinator. We are a small program but have nevertheless realised some important achievements. The RRF (Rapid Response Fund) has been set up and operational since 2008. We have also implemented three projects and have actively assisted in the resolution of conflicts. We file assessment reports and evaluations of what’s going on. Conflicts in this the region always involve issues arising between the country’s two communities, the Afar and the Somali. Most incidents involve the theft of cattle and the occasional cases of physical violence.

We have set up local peace committees in Dikhil and Asa-ila, and trained them on Conflict Prevention Management and Resolution (CPMR). These help to bring all the knowledge to the traditional chiefs and local leaders. We’ve discussed with the various issues in the province.

Ilmi Awaleh Elabeh served as the CEWARN national country coordinator for Djibouti.
and the local stakeholders and pointed out that the real cause of conflict in the region is competition over resources. There is really no infrastructure in this area except for Asa-ila, and no wells from which to draw water. During the dry seasons, the two communities graze in the dry places with little water, and most conflicts arise at these points. People from either Ethiopia or Djibouti who also have families across the border tend to commit most of the thefts. They steal livestock and then escape with them across the border. On the Ethiopian side, the cattle market is rarely profitable, so they bring an animal and sell or just kill it and eat it on the way.

This tends to happen only in the Dikhil cluster because the two communities live together there, unlike other areas. In the north the community is more homogeneous on both sides of the border. There are, for example, the Issa from Ethiopia who enter Djibouti and take animals belonging to the Issa on this side of the border. This is a problem particular to the Dikhil-Asa-ila region because both communities, the Issa and the Afar, straddle the international border. The Issa know that the other tribe, the Afar shall be accused instead. The same is true for the Afar on the other side.

The frequency of these incidents, however, has decreased since we became actively involved. Consequently, the number of cattle being stolen has also decreased since 2010 pace with the many training sessions held and resolutions concluded. The leaders of the two communities have been sensitised and know that the theft usually comes from outside. The conflict resolution workshops for the community are generating results. In one incident, a nomad with his goats spotted another herder walking with five camels. He recognised that the camels belonged to members of the Afar, and he called upon his community to return them.

The absence of field monitors to report friction on the Ethiopian-Djibouti border is compensated for by the fact that there is an autonomous regional administration in Dikhil. The two administrative counterparts coordinate to solve the problems immediately. This facilitates collaboration but it is not always as efficient as it could be. What is important on our side is that the governmental authorities are aware of the problem and have sensitised people to deal with their issues and to grasp the scale of the problem. They are convinced that a given incident will be solved sooner or later, although it cannot be completely eradicated, it will be managed better than before. We have a trans-border committee, but until now the CEWERU was not part of it. But the Prefect is a member of the CEWERU, and this gives him authority to talk to his counterpart in order to resolve
the problem. The custom officers, the army chiefs, the police and the ministries of commerce and foreign affairs are represented on the committee. The fact that all these representatives are part of this committee helps make the leaders aware of what’s going on, and this acts as an incentive to follow up on developmental projects and humanitarian assistance when required.

There are traditional conflict resolution mechanisms but they are not effective if governmental representatives are not taking part in the consultations. There are no peace agreements between the two communities; what forces them to come together is the intervention of a higher authority. Otherwise they are suspicious of one another. Nomads do not easily forget what happened in the past, even if it was many years ago. There is also influence from political parties, especially around election season. Political parties typically favour one community over the other, which aggravates pre-existing tensions.

Until late 2012, the CEWERU did not have a formal presence. It came to life in 2013 through a presidential decree. We consider this to be a promising development. As a result, our people in the field are now mandated to sensitise leaders and their communities. Even though the CEWERU now has legal status, it still has problems of finance and insufficient means to act. Another weakness derives from the fact that most of the administrative personnel we have invested in through training and sensitisation have been transferred, and their replacements do not have a good grasp of the problems we are dealing with.

Despite all these difficulties, we developed an action plan based on CEWARN’s expanded operational framework. We recognise that the action plan requires adequate funding. We are also focusing on research and documentation that was not done in the past. The most vital aspect of the desired capacity building is the need for social services and amenities to reduce competition over resources like water and schools that will encourage herders to settle and reduce their movements. It is hard to reach the nomads on the range in order to provide them with assistance and basic infrastructure.

We have nevertheless been able to solve many conflicts caused by the theft of cattle and camels. In many cases, the return of stolen animals has preserved the peace but the work takes long because of the lack of resources. Negotiations between the two conflicting parties involve bringing some gifts to create a conducive atmosphere before kicking off discussions. There are two cases we have not been able to solve.
The murder of two people from the Afar and Issa in 2008 and 2009 is still feeding suspicions and contributing to the latent conflict between the two communities. The traditional conflict management mechanisms are not working in this case because of the lack of trust. The government claims it happened across the border, and that they have no authority in the matter.

Although limited financial resources are a major constraint for the effective functioning of the Djibouti national CEWERU, the local peace committee we set up in Dikhil is operational. All the community leaders have been sensitised and are aware of CEWARN’s work. The field monitors have been in place since 2007 and execute their jobs properly.