The Dynamics of Pastoral Conflicts and Their Implications for Regional Peace and Security in the Horn of Africa

This paper explores trajectories of pastoral conflicts, their dynamics, and their significance for conflict mitigation in the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) region. Pastoral communities across the region, even those that share close ethno-linguistic and kinship ties, are caught in an intensifying cycle of armed conflicts over scarce rangeland resources and increasingly violent variations on traditional livestock raiding. The paper highlights the ways in which the pattern of pastoral conflicts has changed, and the significance of the emergent pastoral conflicts for regional peace and security in the Horn of Africa countries.

The arid and semi-arid zones in the Horn of Africa countries comprise between thirty to seventy percent of the region’s total land area. These arid and semi arid areas are characterised by extremely harsh ecological conditions, high temperatures, low and erratic rainfall, and scantly vegetation. The pastoralists who occupy these...
zones derive their livelihoods predominantly from livestock production based on periodic migration to utilise seasonally available pasture and water. The natural resources upon which they depend are often found across areas that straddle internal and international borders.

These boundaries complicate pastoralists’ access to resources and fuel conflict. Leadership changes in these countries, intensification of internal civil strife, the inter-state wars involving Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia and the proxy wars between Uganda and Sudan significantly influence the nature of these pastoral conflicts. The region’s armed conflicts fuel the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs), a major factor exacerbating the conflicts among pastoral communities and their spread across international borders.

For the pastoral communities of the Horn, control over resources critical for their immediate survival was traditionally exercised through gerontocracies, systems of governance where authority and power is invested in the institutions of elders. With the spread of illicit firearms, armed conflicts not only escalated but also became more brutal and indiscriminate, especially when the youth acquired automatic rifles outside the control of the elders. This is also a factor in the commercialisation of livestock raiding for the private benefit of individuals who controlled the warriors. The resulting violence distorted mechanisms for coping with adversity within pastoralist livelihood systems, led to increasing levels of poverty as livestock became increasingly concentrated in a few hands, resulting in traditional justice favouring powerful livestock owners. Internal disputes were no longer resolved amicably but through violence and reprisal attacks, leading to cyclical violence. Banditry and highway robbery intensified as conflicts overflowed to non-pastoral districts.

Unlike in the past, pastoral conflicts between groups with close kinship relations, clans, and within ethnic communities are now common. The trend also manifests as an increase in trans-boundary conflicts between pastoral groups in contiguous border areas. Pastoral conflicts not only escalated, but also became more widespread and lethal as direct military engagement with the army and other state security agencies became a common occurrence. Armed pastoral groups now boldly challenge the authority of the state, even where pastoralists are not motivated by a desire for regime change.

The rangelands interface with the region’s wider conflict systems across the Horn region. Political opposition driving regime change, civil strife and inter-state wars, and armed conflicts in pastoral areas all reinforce each other in significant ways. The wider conflicts influenced pastoral conflicts not only
in terms of their underlying causes, but also by exacerbating conflict triggers and other factors that sustain them. In the different contexts in which pastoral conflicts occur, these various factors are typically complex, interconnected, and mutually reinforcing.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PASTORAL CONFLICTS FOR REGIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

Most of the region’s politically marginalised pastoral areas are far removed from the centres of political power. Pastoral areas typically receive the lowest allocation of state resources from their national governments, lack the social services commonly available elsewhere, and suffer from poor planning and misguided economic policies. As a consequence, these regions are characterised not only by high levels of poverty but also lack the necessary infrastructure and social services. This applies for both the provision of schools, clinics and hospitals, and markets as well as roads and the provision of water and other facilities that stimulate growth and economic opportunities for the population. The problems of outlying areas extend to the presence of state institutions responsible for security and enforcement of law and order and control and monitoring of the long porous international borders. The trafficking of illegal firearms from neighbouring conflict zones (such as Somalia and South Sudan) has contributed to the endemic insecurity and instability reinforcing pastoralist conflicts.

The region’s sub-national political dynamics further aggravate the factors contributing to cross-border conflicts. In Kenya, for example, the post-independence movement for a greater Somalia led some among the Somali in Kenya to align themselves with Somalia, and their support for secession reinforced their marginalisation after independence.

More recently, the new constitutional order endorsed in 2010 mandated the transfer of certain powers of the central state to newly created county-level administrative unit, and this contributed to communal conflicts with cross-border ramifications.

Kenya has been grappling with disputes over pasture and farmland in many areas that have pitted pastoral groups against other pastoral groups as well as settled cultivators. In August 2012, Mandera, Wajir and Tana River Counties experienced violent conflicts. Violent clashes have been reported between Degodia and Garre clans in Mandera and Wajir districts, and between the Orma and Pokomo in Tana River County. Other similar conflicts over border realignments occurred in Marsabit County involving the
Gabra and Borana ethnic groups, while the competition for communal grazing lands is further exacerbated by encroachment by farming communities.¹

Such internal frictions are present although they may take different forms within every country in the region. Pastoral conflicts are partly a symptom of the political difficulties and inadequate political will in the respective countries that complicate the challenges of pastoral development. Only recently have planners considered the need to support pastoralist forms of livelihoods without necessarily seeking to change them.

Over the past decade the combination of population growth and ecological stress has aggravated the problem of diminishing resources. Climate change and variability further intensifies scarcities of critical resources such as water and pastures essential for the survival of livestock. Spells of dry weather have become more prolonged, while rainy seasons are now more erratic with an increase in the heavy rains occurring out of season.

Prolonged extreme weather conditions, whether dry or wet, undermine the traditional capacity of pastoral systems to cope with the environmental stress intrinsic to these regions.

Technocratic responses to such conditions typically focused on promoting sedentarisation. Some pastoralists have been forced to abandon livestock rearing and adopt alternative forms of livelihood. Populations of settled farmers and sedentarised herders have increased in the areas previously utilised by the pastoralists. As the resources in the harsh ecological environments inhabited by pastoralists continue to dwindle because of overgrazing and the conversion of important land reserves to non-livestock-based uses, tensions emerge not only within pastoralist groups but also between pastoralists and their agro-pastoral and agricultural neighbours.

Traditional mechanisms for negotiating flexible and reciprocal resource sharing arrangements that worked in the past tend to become less dependable in these circumstances. The changes noted above contribute to escalated conflicts over access to and control of vital resources, leading to indiscriminate and more destructive forms of violence. In Kenya, for example, competition between different pastoralists groups extends not only to access to pastures and water, but also to ownership of land.²

In other cases, conflicts overlap with issues of national sovereignty. Sometimes disputes left unattended


THE DYNAMICS OF PASTORAL CONFLICTS

A single incident of violence in many pastoralist areas can have multiple underlying causes operating at various levels. That is why a given conflict outbreak will almost certainly beget more conflicts that sometimes spill over to neighbouring communities and across borders.

In Uganda, Karamojong livestock raiding has affected agro-pastoral communities in the sub-regions of Sebei, Bugishu, Teso, Lango and Acholi. The August 2012 clashes between the Degodia and Garre clans in Kenya’s Mandera County may have been triggered by disagreements over altered political boundaries, but in many ways were linked to new governance structures that had been established in neighbouring Ethiopia.

Conflicts in one pastoral area can draw in allied pastoral groups from adjoining areas with interests in the conflicts, especially where pastoral communities occupy contiguous border areas and share close kinship relations or alliances with citizens of neighbouring countries.

These relations are important for accessing pastoral resources across national borders during times of scarcity. During the dry season, the Kenyan Pokot move their livestock to Amudat district in Uganda, where they share resources with the Ugandan Pokot. The ŋikamatak section of the Turkana from Loima in Kenya have been moving their herds into Moroto District since the Lokirima peace accord of 1973, where they share resources with the Matheniko section of Karamojong. The ŋiwaikwara section of the Turkana maintains an alliance with the Jie of Kotido District. Pokot raiders hide the stolen animals from Karamoja in Kacheliba and Kapenguria in Kenya. The Matheniko raid livestock from fellow Karamojong and hide them among the ŋikamatak Turkana.

The Dodoth of Kaabong conceal stolen animals from Karamoja among the Didiga of South Sudan, and there are other variations on the pattern of trans-boundary resource-sharing networks that fuel raiding activities and the trafficking of illicit firearms across the borders. The dynamics of the regional interconnectedness of pastoral armed

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conflicts in the Horn of Africa mirror the diverse causes and drivers of these conflicts. The inability by Kenya to undertake a simultaneous and systematic disarmament of the Turkana and Pokot, and the situation in South Sudan where the Toposa and Didinga remained armed worked to undermine the disarmament campaigns undertaken in Karamoja. These initiatives also experienced other problems. For example: a recent study published by the Small Arms Survey reported that criminality is a major driver of the market for firearms elements among the Matheniko Karamojong, who participated in disarmament projects, and sometimes borrow weapons from their neighbours across the border who did not.4

While pastoral conflicts tend to be localised, these conflicts have a tendency not only to destabilize neighbouring non-pastoral regions, but also sometimes feed into internal civil conflicts and inter-state conflicts. In Kenya, unscrupulous political elites were found to be involved in inciting Pokot invasions of private farms belonging to the Luhya community in the Trans-Nzoia district. The Pokot then began to invade the agro-pastoral Marakwet. This syndrome results in communities neighbouring pastoral groups to respond by organising militias for self-defence against raids by armed pastoral groups, which leads to both proliferation of illegal firearms and also other violent conflicts between different ethnic communities as the case of Kenya’s Marakwet, Trans-Nzoia and Uasin Gishu conflicts demonstrated.5

The ‘resource curse’ hypothesis claims that natural resources can provide both motive and opportunity for conflict and create indirect institutional and economic causes of instability. Many pastoral areas are repositories of commercially exploitable deposits of hydrocarbons and minerals. Local conflicts may complicate but no longer act as a barrier to foreign direct investments in all pastoral areas across the greater Horn region. Exploitation of high potential natural resources in these areas, both above-ground, and below ground have led to an upsurge of land grabbing and new conflicts as the indigenous communities are dispossessed and displaced from their lands. In Karamoja, the local ‘resource curse’ initially began with the exploitation of marble and limestone for making cement, foreshadowing the emergence of potentially larger tensions as infrastructure projects begin to open up formerly remote areas for investment and extractive industries—as has been the case with the discovery of oil reserves in Turkana.6

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5 See Broeck (2010), op.cit

To avoid the risk of conflicts over the exploitation of high value commercial resources, these outlying resource-rich pastoral areas need to be designated as first beneficiaries of the revenues generated from the new found wealth. Negotiating this is not easy, as the case of Turkana has demonstrated.

IGAD member states need to invest a significant share of the revenue generated from the various large-scale agriculture and mining ventures in the development of local communities in addition to upgrading the physical infrastructure. But even without these developments, the provision of social services and other measures to support local livelihoods remain key to addressing insecurity in these areas.

The interconnectedness of these conflicts underscores the case for cross-border regional peace and security interventions like the CE-WARN mechanism. Due to the high level of interdependence between pastoralists within countries across the Horn of Africa, conflicts in one pastoral area often both directly and indirectly affect other parts of the country. This means that countries affected by pastoral conflicts need to emphasise controlling small arms and light weapons and implementing developmental frameworks that target improved pastoralist livelihoods and poverty reduction. Consistent with the analysis above, this will require a systematic regional approach that integrates


What does the Future hold for Pastoral Areas?

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measures for reducing pastoral conflicts with other developmental initiatives. At this juncture, programs for reducing the proliferation of arms in pastoral areas, like Uganda’s ambitious Karamoja Integrated Disarmament and Development Programme, face problems due to the difficulties of integrating local initiatives with broader security and development initiatives. Pastoral areas afflicted by armed conflicts are located in remote areas where the central state institutions are weak. Some public servants often opt to avoid postings to such areas; some would rather resign from the civil service than accept being posted to these so-called hardship regions. For security personnel, serving in conflict zones come with their own risks. Without effective state institutions for enforcement of law and order, it is difficult to reverse the volatility affecting insecure regions.

In Karamoja, while raiding declined due to the relative improvement in security associated with the government’s disarmament programs, isolated cattle thefts and opportunistic road ambushes by criminals continued. Even in conflict free zones, new flare-ups can quickly engulf communities with a history of conflict. It will be difficult for the communities to volunteer information useful for sustainable peace as long as those who commit crimes, including raiding, theft, and possession of illegal firearms are not apprehended and prosecuted. The limited public investment in law enforcement and the administration of justice means criminals and the perpetrators of communal violence will continue to enjoy impunity contributing to the malaise in pastoral areas.

The problems of access and responding to local conflicts underscore the need for infrastructural development. In many pastoralist regions, existing roads are poorly maintained and become impassable during the rainy seasons. The extension of telecommunication network coverage has helped, but sometimes coverage is incomplete and connectivity is poor. Fortunately, the transport and communication infrastructure is gradually improving but much work remains, especially in light of the increase in extreme climatic events. In the meantime, the improvements in transport and communications have created new problems including the rapid evacuation of stolen livestock and the use of mobile phones to coordinate raids.

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CONCLUSION:
KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION

Government and development partners need to be sensitive to the tensions that divide pastoral communities, as well as the states where they reside. The drivers of these conflicts are not only diverse but also mutually reinforcing and can also feed into the causes of the wider conflicts occurring across the IGAD region. Because of the interdependent quality of the phenomenon, the failure to address the roots of individual conflicts undermines the success of other efforts to mitigate broader causes and catalysts of regional conflicts. This is why conflict-sensitive approaches should be mainstreamed in all development interventions, especially in areas afflicted by chronic violence in the past. Addressing pastoral conflicts requires security related interventions that also emphasise the need for promoting sustainable livelihoods through supporting interventions for enhancing food security and supporting income generation activities through diversified sources of incomes for pastoral households.

It is important to understand where the multiple forces driving pastoral conflicts originate and the internal and external factors that sustain the cycle of the conflicts. Pastoral conflicts at times disguise the role of actors operating within national and regional political arenas. What may begin as internecine conflicts can become more lethal and destructive affairs with actors across national borders both directly and indirectly fanning the conflicts.

In contiguous border areas where insecurity is associated with presence of armed pastoral groups, it is essential for the respective countries in the Horn of Africa to undertake joint cross-border security
and disarmament operations. The pastoral communities who bear the brunt of insecurity must also be involved in order to develop a sense of ownership in disarmament and peace-building projects. Provision of adequate security for communities after disarmament is essential for reducing their vulnerability to attacks from neighbours who have not disarmed. Countries also need to invest in mechanisms for conflict early warning and response to ensure timely and effective action in response to actual or planned conflicts.

To succeed, this requires measures mitigating the effects of past conflicts, including the commercialisation of livestock raiding activities. It is evident from the above discussions that pastoral conflicts are not only dynamic and complex, but also require collective interventions for improving regional peace and security in the IGAD region. For CEWARN, this means that more efforts are needed to help policy makers and implementers understand how conflict analysis and the participation of civil society is central to conflict prevention.

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