Anatomy of a Communal Conflict: The Moyale Case Study

The main communities in Moyale—the Borana, Gabra, Burji and the Sakuye—have been present there for hundreds of years. The Somalis and other pastoralist groups came to the area later. These communities, which broadly share a language and culture, have lived together in peace for a long time. The perception people used to have when they hear a reference to ‘Northern Kenya’ was not objective; they commonly assumed when you come to Moyale you won’t return alive. That kind of thinking has gone away and now many people from other parts of Kenya are coming to Moyale. Members of the Kikuyu, Meru, and even Maasai communities have bought plots and built homes. Moyale is a border town and local business is booming.

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When the CEWARN team needed a person to monitor conflict in Moyale, I was recruited by the first CEWARN country coordinator in Kenya. During the 2008 post-election violence, it was very peaceful here. Moyale was spared the se-
rious violence in the rest of Kenya which almost tipped into civil war. I was a personal witness to how this changed in Moyale during the aftermath of the next national elections in March 2013. What follows is a case study of the complications and challenges of managing cross-border conflicts. I need to start at the beginning to explain how these changes came about.

Growing up, I did not even know that I was Borana. I only knew that all around me were neighbours living together in harmony. We could easily go to the houses of my friends after school when my mother wasn’t at home. I would eat at the neighbours’, who were not Borana. They would also eat with us. I only came to see myself as Borana years later when I joined secondary school in 1997. That’s when the frictions among our communities began. I heard there was conflict between the Borana and the Garre in Ethiopia. Then I also heard the Burji were fighting both the Garre and Borana. This is how my friends and I realised we were from different ethnic backgrounds. Conflict started and internal divisions began opening up within our own communities.

The village I come from supplies water to the whole of Moyale. This was before we had water user associations or committees. Anybody could be elected to these committees. Gradually, everything changed including the composition of settlements. People moved and you began hearing of Borana or Gabra villages. We started developing suspicions of each other, even among the friends with whom I grew up.

Of course there had been issues of livestock theft before this, although they were not ethnic in character. There was a chief in my area, a very tough but learned man. If people were fighting in the next village, he would contain it. He would tell them, “If you want to fight it is ok, but not in my location. Go out in the bush and fight there so that your dead body isn’t brought into my location.” He handled security very well.

The first time I actually saw an ethnic conflict in town was in 2001. It started at a water point and spread into the town. The military camped outside Moyale and threatened to come into the town. The chief controlled it, and he became recognised as one of the outstanding people here for his efforts to maintain security and peace. Those fighting were brought into our location. They were shocked that there was peace here even though the same people were fighting outside. The chief was appointed as the District Peace and Reconciliation Chairperson. We were very close to him and he used to call me to assist in peacekeeping activities. That’s how I found myself involved in peace and security work.
Prior to 2005, there were no major issues except for the usual cattle rustling among the pastoralists. The raiders would go take a few animals and flee with them. But this changed after Moyale became one of the areas perceived as a hideout for rebels like the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in Ethiopia. Whenever the OLF crossed to attack within Ethiopia, the Ethiopian military would also come across the border searching for them. The Ethiopian military is allowed to do this due to an agreement with the Kenyan government, though the arrangement is not well documented. At times the two governments conduct joint operations to flush out the rebels. The common people are caught in-between. During the 1990s many people were killed on suspicion of sympathising with the rebels, including some government chiefs.

The Borana are part of the larger Oromo community, so in the minds of Ethiopians, Kenyan Borana were assumed to be harbouring the rebels. In 2000, there was a meeting where the Provincial Commissioner for Eastern Province addressed the Borana. It actually worked. Some of the people stopped engaging in such activities. They handed over their ammunition, guns, and other weapons. Some of the rebels are still in Kenya but they don’t exert as much impact as before. Even so, the problems returned. There were two incidents when rebels attacked police stations in Ethiopia’s Region Four and Five.

When clans began fighting in Moyale in 2013 and 2014 many Kenyans from Moyale fled to Ethiopia. Incidents on both sides of the border were now contributing to local conflicts. The atmosphere of peace and calm began to decline. What happened next stemmed from changes in the Kenyan Constitution. The Borana formerly controlled most of the political power in Marsabit and Isiolo counties. Then people began building group alliances among the different communities. The biggest one was REGABU, an anagram referring to the Rendille, Gabra and Burji formed in 2007, but it was more name than a political force initially. The alliance revived with the coming of devolution under the new Constitution. The three communities came together and started talking within themselves and the smaller communities united against the Borana. The objective was to capture all the political positions in Marsabit County: Governor, Senator, Members of Parliament (MPs), and Members of the County Assembly (MCAs).

The elections under the new Constitution ended up disintegrating the power of the Borana clans. Fighting erupted over the results and the frictions went on until February 2014. A lot of people died, many were displaced, and property was destroyed; two schools were burnt to ashes. Property worth around three million Kenyan shillings was lost. Seven dispensaries
were looted and vandalised in the villages of Manyatta and Elu. I’ve never witnessed such fighting. I don’t know where the people got the money to wage a campaign featuring heavy weaponry like machine guns, small bombs, M-16 rifles, and AK-47s.

These arms reportedly came from Somalia, implicating Somalia’s Transitional Federal Government’s army recruits who were being trained in Isiolo. Some of the recruits ran away with the weapons. It is estimated that over one thousand trainees ended up joining clan militias. While the conflict was raging on the Kenyan side, our women and children were on the Ethiopian side. That’s when the OLA attacked a Kenyan police station and launched the attacks in southern Ethiopia, forcing the women and children to return back to Kenya. The Ethiopian authorities gave an order that no Kenyans should be found in Moyale, Ethiopia. The OLF were trying to influence the opinion of the people against the Ethiopian government. However, it turned out that the result was the opposite as the rebels had become a liability for the Borana here.

We don’t recognise that border as a barrier; we recognise the different security officers’ uniforms from Kenya and Ethiopia. We get almost everything we use from Ethiopia except for finished products and other manufactured items made in Kenya. But the issues that are affecting Ethiopia also affect us. We are separated by the boundaries, but we share all other aspects of life with our people in Ethiopia. Most of the livestock being transported to Nairobi come from Ethiopia, especially cows and camels, and the large livestock market in Sololo serves all communities across the border. When these problems happen it is hard for the Ethiopians to transport their animals to the Kenyan side because they may be attacked anytime. That was the situation along the border in 2014.

As CEWARN peace monitors, our primary task is to share information among our team. This entails circulating the information among the peace monitors and local peace committees in Ethiopia and Kenya; with local and national Kenyan authorities and reporting to the CEWARN secretariat in Addis Ababa.

During the first phase of CEWARN’s existence we played a major role in the recovery of stolen livestock and supporting local peacebuilding activities. Before that, no one could recover stolen animals taken to Ethiopia. Now, if animals are stolen I just inform my counterpart in Ethiopia that a number of animals were stolen from this area and he informs the authorities there. One cannot just cross the border any more and take the animals to the market because there are security arrangements in place. There was a recent case in Moyale where the Borana stole
three hundred Gabra livestock but they couldn’t take them anywhere because the border had been closed. They willingly returned the animals. The incident illustrates the benefits of sharing of information and cross border linkages including the local Peace Committees.

The clashes that erupted in 2014 highlighted an expanded set of drivers, like the role of weapons diverted from Somalia and the regional politics that came to exacerbate Moyale’s growing communal divisions.

The whole country was tense during the period between 2010 and 2013. Like those of us working for CEWARN, many other Kenyans feared a repeat of past experiences like the 2008 post-election violence. Everyone was prepared, including the National Steering Committee on Peace Building. We have established methods for communicating developments on the ground like situation briefs and alerts. In this case, we acted systematically to alert the Kenya CEWERU and proceeded to work with the government’s District and Provincial Commissioners. We were also sending other reports documenting developments to the secretariat in Addis Ababa. We applied to the Rapid Response Fund (RRF) for convening meetings in 2013, but unfortunately the delay in approval meant that the assistance came too late. The response time of the RRF has improved since that time.

CEWARN directed some of us to share information, give directions and advice, and help the local authorities with documentation. We normally have linkages with the villages and beyond and this generated additional information we shared with the local authorities. The sharing of that information was important. I came to understand that sometimes the system works, but other times it fails because the response process is slowed down by bureaucratic procedures.

For example: I inform the District Commissioner who informs the Provincial Commissioner who then has to call the national office. By the time they respond, a number of days have passed. In cases of violence, we usually report to the nearest police station, we don’t involve those other offices. Our relationship with the local authorities is good. Sometimes they request for advice from us and even ask us to assist them in their work.

So, we share information with the authorities and also collaborate in other practical ways. That’s how we help contain the situation; that’s how CEWARN field monitors work.

The conflict in Moyale, as I explained earlier, began with alliances being formed. No one anticipated the amount of destruction and loss in terms of property and human lives that the contest over the new constitutional arrangement – in-
volving the direct election of a Governor and Members of County Assembly to manage resources at the local level - would lead to. It was a unique conflict that turned into an all out war. Even the Kenyan military were cautious about intervening because of the heavy weaponry being used by the ethnic militias.

The conflagration was also linked to some of the regional governments in Ethiopia. It appears that some of the local people behind the violence had sought out their support among the Gabra and the Garre living in Ethiopia’s Region Five, which is governed by the Somali regional government, and the Borana and Oromo inhabiting Region Four. The evidence indicates there must have been an element of Ethiopian security personnel engaged in the conflict as well. There have been reports of arrests made to that effect.

There are also accounts of people wearing police uniforms involved in the fighting and police reservists who should have been neutral were also participating in the clashes, some of them were seen returning to the police armoury to get more ammunition.

I estimate about a hundred lives were lost. Some twenty thousand families were displaced from their homes although fortunately not all the villages were affected. There are people who spent millions constructing their houses only to see them burnt down. Even the foundations were destroyed. The destruction included a school where all the facilities, library and laboratories were burnt down. If I take you to Moyale now to look at the site, you would not even tell there was once a school there.

There is nothing left of the villages in Elu and Manyatta. When I visited after the clashes, there was smoke everywhere and only the euphorbia fences were left standing. I don’t think such a thing has happened in this part of Kenya before.

The Maikona Pact which was formulated by Borana and Gabra elders several years before was left in pieces, and the elders couldn’t work together after developments got out of hand. So the case was referred to the Office of the President, and that’s how things returned to normal. But some people had nowhere to go after their houses were burnt down.

Initially, the conflict revolved around natural resources like pasture and water. After the politicians became involved, the dynamics changed to involve frictions over political boundaries, then escalated to fighting over government positions. The political problem was ultimately sorted out through the intervention from above. The two antagonists: the Regabu coalition and the Borana signed a memorandum for the distribution of political offices. The agreement was docu-
mented. Harmony was restored and after the losses, people had a feeling that enough is enough.

Our communities have learnt a lesson. Managing cross border relationships requires more meetings, especially ones that brings on board all the communities involved.

There are still many things to be done in regard to compensation and dialogue. The trauma caused by the death and destruction requires healing. You may bring guns, policemen or the military, but you cannot remove what’s in people’s minds. We need to strengthen support for the victims and to devise strategies for their psychological and social support. Our local leaders are central to the problem. I don’t think things will change in Moyale as long as the same community leaders who are warlords are also the peacemakers. As a field monitor, it worries me that someone who was fighting the other day is taking credit for making peace today.

There are traditional institutions that used to work efficiently before, like the Yaa, the Gada. They had developed guiding principles and rules to manage water points and pasture that worked for generations. Now that we have the County Government, there is the political space for strengthening the communities’ customary laws and rules. If you go to the villages, the elders no longer enjoy their former authority.

Elders’ contribution to conflict is now minimal, while women and youths are often active participants. Women supply ammunition to fighters, cook food, and take water to the battlefield, and even carry guns. The youth can be very cunning agitators, and social media has become an important factor. It’s both very useful yet at times very disruptive. On the eve of conflicts in Marsabit County, there was another war being waged on Facebook and Twitter. But there was also Marsabit County for Peace and other hash tags like that. Although the youth can be a problem, there is a change in their thinking. The orientation of many youths is becoming more issue-based, indicating soon they may prefer to vote in someone who shall bring peace to Marsabit, regardless of their ethnic background.

Personally I feel sad and disappointed after the events of the recent past. But I also see positive developments, although they highlight the challenges of sustaining security over the long run. CEWARN has improved from where it was when we started. There are challenges but we are moving forward.