

Scarcity of natural resources and pastoral conflicts in northern Kenya: an inquiry

The Horn of Africa, the home to several pastoral groups, is today seen as a battleground for violent conflicts. The problem of ethnic conflicts and violent raids in the past decades is mainly blamed on increases in populations, ecological stress and a dwindling resource-base, and the resulting competing claims over scarce natural resources. Though the precarious ecological and economic position of pastoralists is a fact, the claim that natural resource scarcity induces conflicts has to be tested empirically. Evidence from analysis of inter-ethnic conflicts shows that the validity of this claim is questionable. One interesting question is for instance to what extent the pastoral peoples can fight over or for resources they either do not have or have in short supply. This article wants to look at empirical data for the association of resource scarcity and conflicts among pastoralists. Secondly, it argues for the relevance that such results might have for responses that aim at rooting out the causes of the problem.

Characteristics of pastoral communities and their key resources

Pastoral communities are set apart from other populations by certain common characteristics. First and by definition, pastoralists derive a substantial share of their livelihoods from livestock and share communal rangeland resources. The rangelands are in turn influenced by erratic rainfall that considerably varies between and within years. The rainfall patterns also have direct implications both for livestock mobility and the land-to-livestock ratio (i.e. carrying capacity), or grazing pressures of the rangelands. Second, in the arid pastoral areas the production potential of livestock and the rangeland resources are low due to rainfall patterns. Since livestock significantly contributes to the pastoral production, herd size affects pastoral human welfare and therefore livestock wealth accumulation is a desirable goal. The latter (and restocking) is stated as a major cause for incidents of pastoral conflicts during drought periods.

The pastoralists' areas are harsh and difficult environments prone to high risks. The per capita livestock wealth of pastoral households has continued to decline over the years. As a result, pastoralists today rank high in terms of poverty levels and score poorly when assessed on other social welfare indicators (e.g. education levels, maternal health and nutritional status especially among children under 5 years). The

pastoralists also frequently face basic food security problems, inter-ethnic conflicts that often are attributed to competition for access to scarce key natural resources and ecological stress. Many scholars and policy makers view or merely brush aside the incidences of pastoral conflicts as a “usual phenomenon”. Such perceptions have, unfortunately, tended to misinform the public view and shaped responses to the problem negatively. In combination, these features of the pastoralists provide the background and the context within which pastoral conflicts have to be analysed.

The debate about linking pastoral conflicts to scarcity of natural resources

There is a substantial literature focusing on violent conflicts between pastoral communities. A good deal of this literature attempts to explain, to varying degrees, the causes and the underlying motives of inter-ethnic conflicts between pastoralists, and even between herders and farmers. The main tenets of conflicts among pastoralists are usually seen to be adverse events and ecological stress.

First, severe droughts and outbreaks of animal diseases regularly occur in the dry land pastoral areas. These adverse factors cause considerable livestock wealth differentiations between households and between different ethnic groups. The need to accumulate herds after periods of (differentiated) animal losses due to droughts is usually presented as a strong motivation of inter-ethnic raids and violent pastoral conflicts. This argument makes sense, is convincing and logically consistent. This way of reasoning would mean that periods after droughts would show an increase in inter-ethnic raids, because many livestock deaths during droughts would lead to a greater incentive to restock through raiding others. The key argument is built on the common belief that herd accumulation, for whatever cause and reasons, is one of the most important driving forces of pastoral conflicts. Raiding is argued to constitute a vehicle for climbing out of herd-poverty and for gaining a culturally endorsed social status. The region's increased frequency and intensity of droughts in the past decades and associated heavy losses of livestock is suggested to have increased the number of inter-ethnic conflicts and incidents of human killing in the recent, compared to the distant, past.

Secondly, the pastoral system is based on a flexible property rights regime and on herd mobility that optimises production by rearing diverse livestock species and exploiting the varied patchiness of rangelands. In that system herd mobility transcends national borders. Studies have consistently shown the pastoralists' loss of dry season fallback grazing areas due to other land uses and a decline in per capita livestock wealth in pastoral areas of Africa. The creation of legally protected areas and national boundaries tends to disadvantage the pastoral strategic and opportunistic use of rangeland resources. The reduction of herd mobility due to restrictive policies results in rangeland degradation, which in turn leads to increased livestock deaths while human populations are growing. A low per capita wealth of pastoral households naturally puts human needs obtained from livestock, and other social and cultural obligations fulfilled by animals, at a critical point in the pastoral life and raises doubts about the survivability of pastoralism. Thus, geopolitics clearly have become a factor in environmental conflicts and a cause of environmental insecurity across border lands as political powers define territories and physical boundaries that hinder herd mobility.

To date, empirical works have tended to rely on only a few incidences of conflicts, making any claim weak in its approach and raising serious questions about the validity of the evidence. Among other issues, the trend in incidences of pastoral conflicts has yet to be understood and a better analysis of the underlying causes of the problem is needed. Ethnic frictions and conflicts are non-trivial issues in the Horn of Africa. Incidences of pastoral conflicts are common, but attributable to a number of factors (besides scarcity of natural resources) and their reasons need to be disaggregated. The analysis and results in this article formed the basis of an ongoing research that mainly focuses on pastoral groups in the northern and north-western regions of Kenya, and compares incidents of (violent) conflicts among various groups, but also pays attention to incidences of conflicts with the adjacent groups across the Ethiopia and Sudan borders.

Empirical test of the conflicts-scarce resources relations: the example of northern Kenya

A report cited in UN OCHA-Kenya in 2001 described the Horn of Africa as a region of continuous and endemic security problems of cattle-rustling raids and political instability. However, almost all the claims about inter-ethnic conflicts being a result of natural resources scarcity have been based on analysis of only limited incidents.

Pastoral conflicts are linked to and influenced by a combination of factors that complicate the nature of the problem, and challenge the understanding of the causal factors and their interaction effects. A case study carried out jointly by the authors, embarked on a thorough historical study (i.e. since the early 20th century) of all reported cases of violence in the Marsabit District in northern Kenya. The main aim was to better understand the problem of pastoral conflict. This particular study was set to investigate long-term trends of inter-ethnic conflicts and empirically test the relationships between resource scarcity and violent conflicts among pastoralist populations in the northern region of Kenya. The key research questions were: Have inter-ethnic raids and incidences of violent conflicts increased with the downward trends in rainfall and substantial decline in livestock wealth in per capita terms? And, do conflicts mainly occur during and after droughts, and during dry seasons? The study considered both seasonality and general long-term trends of the association between natural resources and inter-ethnic conflicts. This approach was inspired by the fact that the problem of inter-ethnic conflicts can be addressed with regard to resource availability (with rainfall amounts indicating the level of availability of range resources), and the dynamic changes in livestock wealth.

The study found a negative correlation between violent conflicts and drought, as well as immediate post-drought periods, although those are the periods when scarcity is experienced most, and show most livelihood tensions in pastoral communities. There are clear indications that violent incidences occur much more often in rainy seasons and during relatively good years, than in dry seasons and during droughts. Further, the evidence shows twice as many persons are likely to be killed in a violent conflict during relatively rainy years (i.e. in a time of relative resource abundance) than in the drought (drier) years. This result also reflects herders' viewpoints and explanations. They see droughts as difficult times when animals are weak, survival is hard and people are more inclined to stop fighting, patch up their differences, renegotiate access rules and rights, and reconcile to cooperate. These views suggest that when survival becomes difficult as during droughts, people decide to defer actions to raid until an appropriate time in the future. During the rainy seasons animals are in good condition and strong to withstand long distance trek, manpower demand is low, enhanced chance of rain to wash away tracks and rich vegetation cover, each or all in combination, enable raiding and increase the prospects of successful raiding.

In addition, when changes in incidences of conflicts are normalized by the human populations in per capita terms (i.e. conflict incidents in each period are divided by the corresponding human population) to allow comparison of individual incidents over time, there is no evidence that more violence is occurring now than in past periods. Moreover, it was inquired whether previous drought (and high livestock death) years are associated with (violent) conflicts in the subsequent years. Here, too, no evidence was found that devastating droughts in previous years are likely to be related to more violent conflicts or raids in subsequent years without drought, or receiving above-average rainfall amounts. Therefore, evidence from the case-study analysis of the inter-ethnic conflicts suggests that the validity of the claim that the scarcity of natural resources causes conflicts among pastoralists is not supported. Still, where and why pastoral conflicts occur remain intriguing questions. This evidence shifts to the question why people may not fight over resources they do not have or have in short supply; thus hinting at instances of human cooperation in the face of growing scarcity of key resources.

The direction for future research and policy responses

An investigation of the relationships between resource scarcity and conflict intensity in pastoral areas will continue to be at the core of the development agenda. It would be useful to find out how sideline issues relate to or influence (or even are influenced by) inter-ethnic raids and counter-raids (or revenges). The aim is to cover a multitude of factors behind inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts and to broaden the scope of the investigation and analysis of pastoral conflicts and related issues.

Future research in this direction, in our view, should explicitly look into incidences of pastoral conflicts with a view to changing negative perceptions on the basis of matter-of-fact analysis, and for informing policy responses that attend to the causes of the problem. The case-study evidence reported in this article points to a need for finding a new, innovative approach for dealing with the pastoral conflicts and their concomitant issues. Such an approach entails the categorization of causes of conflicts among pastoralists into indicators, intensity measurements and changes in incidence so as to ascertain the trend in underlying causes of conflict. If adopted, the approach gives an opportunity to carefully analyse the problem to come up with solutions tailored to specific circumstances of groups in conflicts. Regarding such an approach, several issues can motivate future research. For instance, how significant is the role of ethnicity in pastoral conflicts? In talking about livestock raiding the term ethnic conflicts is often used, yet we mean to refer to members of a specific group who are 'practising raiders' who at bare minimum made decisions and took actions to execute actual raiding practice and are a group that transcends age-limits or ethnic group affiliation to be true culprits of an offence. Again, of course, from whose viewpoint such incidents are being looked at matters. Which factors do best explain why at times warring pastoral groups form alliances against others and share resources, but break up other times to become foes only to regroup themselves later as allies?

Another issue for future research is the influence of the proliferation of modern firearms that result in more damaging effects and much higher harms of its victims, replacing the traditional spears and machetes. This is by far the greatest change that is shaping the patterns and nature of conflicts in the pastoral areas. On this note, any effective measure for dealing with pastoral conflicts and mitigating a wide range of related problems is a fundamental concern since temporal aspects of the problem are a valuable consideration. Governance concerns and conflict resolution relate to changes in institutions of raids and conflicts as they were carried out in the distant past compared to how they are executed in the more recent past. The dynamics of local institutions of conflicts that fuel inter-ethnic hatred and violence can be taken into account by using ethnic differences and age-categories (e.g. local elders, youth etc). The *other factors* causing conflicts such as changes in the legal systems, economy and age-set, and politics over (natural and state) resources constitute 'intervening variables'. Taken together, these issues are instrumental in providing insights into the nature and intensity of ethnic rivalry between pastoral peoples, and require attention in future research with relevance for intervention efforts. In a broad sense, such research might also interest development agencies (locally initiated or linked to an international agency) working at the local level. Conflict resolution and peacebuilding strategies between contentious pastoral groups in the Horn should aim either at easing tensions or conflict avoiding options.

Conclusion

Recurring severe droughts that diminish livestock populations, deteriorating environmental conditions, and constrained access to rangeland resources are often seen to be inter-locked with cycles of raids and livestock rustling. These problems are blamed on the growing competition over natural resources, and to weak community-level institutions and reduced power of the local elders for resolving conflicts. In the absence of a framework to broker peace evolving out of local peoples' peacebuilding processes and committed choices of conflict avoidance and mitigation, options for finding an enduring solution are as difficult as they are costly. The case-study results presented here

challenge the widely held claim that inter-ethnic pastoral conflicts are mostly motivated by declining per capita livestock wealth (or wealth differentiation between different groups) or induced by scarcity of natural (or environmental) resources. Yet, there are only a few thorough empirical works on the relationships between natural resources scarcity and pastoral conflicts based on long-term time-series data. It seems a reasonable guess to explain the frequent occurrence of violent conflicts without any prior warning by the failure of local institutions in building peace. It would also seem plausible to assert that pastoral conflicts recur unabatedly because of inefficiencies ingrained in the judicial system and their poor enforcements of the rule of law. The role of 'formal politics' and the behaviour of local politicians in election-related violent conflicts, by manipulating ethnicity and emphasizing politics of difference for electoral gains, are also becoming emerging concerns. However, the causes of conflicts in pastoral areas may not easily be understood according to the micro-macro-level categories. Neither can motives of conflicts be combined into a single factor across groups or over time, nor can the problem be isolated from today's global issues. The 'practicing raiders' behaviour in terms of how violent conflicts of whatever cause are conceived, meticulously planned, and fought out are difficult to understand, but extremely important. The landscape of pastoral conflicts changes in an unpredictable way, which is making responses more difficult and research into the realities of these conflicts more compelling.

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