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Notes on Land-based Conflicts in Kenya's Arid Areas

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In recent years and months, the conflict-ridden pastoralist areas of northern Kenya have been experiencing new waves of violence. This has been especially important in the Isiolo area, Moyale and along the Pokot–Turkana boundary. Here, raiding is common and people are killed almost on a daily basis in the course of violent clashes between members of different tribes. Large numbers of small weapons (mostly guns of different origin) held by the local population represent a pertinent challenge for the security in the

semi-arid rangelands of Kenya's north (Bollig and Österle 2007; Mkutu 2008), and constant violence has detrimental social and economic consequences (McCabe 2004; Gray et al. 2003).

In a recent contribution to this journal, Boye and Kaarhus (2011) provide an explanation for these current patterns of violence. Land reform projects, which are part and parcel of the new constitution of 2010, promise to redress past injustices in land distribution. These policies, the authors argue rightly, provide a window of opportunity for change and thus give rise to competing claims to land by different ethnic groups. We subscribe to this argument but also find that the policies in question are just one dimension of the problem, and that there are other relevant factors deserving of our attention.

In this short contribution, we will sketch out four different, yet related strands of argument in order to open them up for broader discussion on the causes of violence in northern Kenya. First, we argue that current patterns of violence need to be understood against the backdrop of political restructuring, democratization, decentralization and nation-building. Second, we focus on current processes of re-shaping the use of and the access to land in pastoral areas. Third, we point to structural transformations within pastoralist societies. Fourth, we discuss the historical and cultural dynamics of the conflicts at hand.

1. In the past two decades, patterns of violent conflict in pastoralist areas have been increasingly triggered by highly politicized claims to land (Schlee 2011). Competing political elites in these areas often aggressively refer to past "injustices" and current "infringements" in order to gain symbolic capital with their electorate. A discourse on "belonging" (Geschiere 2009), the authenticity of land claims, and the salience of district boundaries is being developed and contested. Administrative boundaries, exclusive access to land, and attempts to safeguard an ethnically homogeneous electoral base have become major issues of contention. These dynamics are intimately linked to recent processes of democratization and decentralization, which have created windows of opportunity for (re)negotiating territorial claims. The land-reform projects singled out by Boye and Kaarhus (2011) are but one aspect of these complex processes. Decentralization (new constitution), boundary adjustment policies (IEBC),¹ and ideas of political Majimboism² (Anderson

1 The Independent Electoral and Boundary Commission (IEBC) is the commission assigned to approve or revise the physical boundaries of the constituencies in Kenya. It took over these tasks from the former Interim Independent Boundary Review Commission (Ligale Commission).

2 Majimboism is a specific form of de-centralization/regionalism based on ethnic identity.

2010) are further dimensions that round out the picture. Based on these factors, the current patterns of violence cannot be decoupled from processes of nation-building in Kenya at large (Greiner n.d.-a).

2. Many pastoralist communities inhabiting northern Kenya are currently undergoing rapid transformations in their relations to land. Sedentarization, rapid population growth, privatization of formerly communally used pastures, the spread of wildlife conservation areas (particularly in the Isiolo area), and the ever-increasing importance of crop cultivation: All of these are factors that lead to a growing pressure on land and directly contribute to a fragmentation of land use (Galvin 2009). In short, whereas before, pastoralists and administrators devised rules of resource use, nowadays a large number of different stakeholders negotiate the access to and the administration of land (Bollig and Österle 2008). Overlapping and often competing interests characterize the management of natural resources among mobile pastoralists, agro-pastoralists, conservancy managers, and governmental and non-governmental organizations. This diversity of aspirations and needs is felt in clashes not only between communities, but also within communities. Intra-community conflict is on the rise and is progressively also taking violent forms. In the Baringo area, for example, Greiner found that the planned implementation of a wildlife conservancy not only triggered violent clashes between Pokot and Samburu, but also led to massive tensions within the Pokot community (Greiner n.d.-b).
3. Brubaker (2002) reminds us to break with common sense understandings of ethnic conflicts as conflicts between bounded and mappable groups. Groups are constructed, and ethnicity is not an attribute but rather a process. As analysts, we should focus on how, when and why groups and ethnicity emerge (or dissolve) and on the actors who instrumentalize such dynamics. Based on this, we have to keep in mind who is currently stirring up conflicts in pastoralist areas. We argue that the erosion of traditional governance structures (Lesorogol 2008) has led to a power vacuum that is increasingly filled by political leaders and other power-brokers taking advantage of the opportunity to renegotiate boundaries and access to land. They have realized that on the national level ethnic mobilization continues to play a major role in political struggles, and they carry these dynamics even into the remotest pastoralist areas, often in a move to create an electorate for themselves. Political mobilization and clientelism accompanies increasing stratification. The nouveau riche in northern Kenya often aspire to gain private land

tenure and successfully couple livestock-based activities with trade, crop cultivation and salaried jobs.

4. We feel that the current characteristics of pastoralist conflicts present a historical twist. While precolonial raiding aimed to extend boundaries and land (Waller 1985), during colonial rule the goals of raiding changed. Colonial administrators could not completely inhibit raiding, but the once-set boundaries were controllable and guaranteed by the administrative apparatus. Up to the 1990s, raiding and conflict among pastoralists was still described by analysts as non-territorial strategy (Dyson-Hudson and Dyson-Hudson 1980). Yet, in light of the current dynamics, it appears that raiding without territorial aspirations is a product of Pax Britannica. Once the state had lost the capacity to control boundaries – particularly noticeable after Daniel arap Moi lost power – raiding almost by necessity resulted in changes in access to land, for example in the case along the Pokot–Turkana boundary. Like many conflicts in the areas in question, this conflict has its historical roots. As McCabe (2004) has pointed out, inter-ethnic violence is a product of historical events, environmental constraints, and regional and national politics. However, he cautioned against underestimating the importance of prejudices held by certain ethnic groups against certain others and of the political leaders that draw upon and manipulate these deeply held attitudes to strengthen their political position and ethnically based land-use agendas.

To sum up, political processes at the national level, profound changes in land use and tenure, changes in internal power relations, and historical and cultural patterns of conflict are all contributing to the current escalation of violence. We feel that these four lines of reasoning should be taken into account in order to gain a more holistic picture of the ongoing tensions.

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