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Environmental Change, Food Crises and Violence in Dassanech, Southern Ethiopia

Yntiso Gebre

Research Unit Peace and Conflict Studies
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Environmental Change, Food Crises and Violence in Dassanech, Southern Ethiopia

Yntiso Gebre

Abstract

This paper examines pastoral conflicts in Dassanech area, Southern Ethiopia, against the background of environmental change and food insecurity. The study reveals a relationship between environmental stress and the escalation of inter-ethnic pastoral conflicts in the area. Nevertheless, pastoral conflicts in Dassanech are complex and strongly challenge the idea of a direct causal link between concrete environmental factors and specific conflict incidents. Socio-cultural and economic factors cause or trigger conflicts independently or in conjunction with ecological processes. Furthermore, infrastructure and large-scale agricultural development project are likely to influence the social configuration in the Omo River basin and therefore, possibly, also local conflict dynamics. The paper argues that local social and cultural factors play an important role for conflict action, and that, therefore, the study of resource conflicts must not be reduced to economic, agricultural, and ecological aspects.

Zusammenfassung

Das Papier analysiert Konflikte zwischen Gruppen mobiler Tierhalter_innen in Dassanech, Südatiopiern, im Zusammenhang mit Umweltwandel und Ernährungsunsicherheit. Die Studie verweist auf eine Beziehung zwischen Umweltveränderungen und der Eskalation von inter-ethnischen Konflikten im Untersuchungsgebiet. Gleichzeitig betont der Autor, dass Intergruppenkonflikte zwischen mobilen Tierhalter_innen komplexe Phänomene sind und kein unmittelbarer Kausalzusammenhang zwischen ökologischen Faktoren und Gewalthandeln besteht. Gesellschaftlich-kulturelle und ökonomische Faktoren verstärken und verursachen Konflikte unabhängig von oder in Wechselwirkung mit ökologischen Prozessen. Darüber hinaus beeinflussen in der Region Infrastrukturprojekte sowie die Entwicklung großflächiger Landwirtschaft die sozialen Bedingungen und infolge möglicherweise auch die Konfliktdynamiken. Gebre Yntiso argumentiert, dass lokale soziale und kulturelle Faktoren eine bedeutende Rolle für Konflikthandeln spielen und Konflikte um natürliche Ressourcen deshalb nicht auf ökonomische und (agrar-)ökologische Aspekte reduziert werden dürfen.

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1. Introduction

Inter-ethnic conflicts in the lower Omo valley (where the Dassanech people live) have steadily increased in intensity and frequency. It appears that resource scarcity (which could be explained in terms of natural and social factors), the growing pressure over fast dwindling resources, and certain cultural factors are the driving force of conflict dynamics. There are clear indications that the human and livestock populations in the study area have been increasing. Although adequate meteorological records are lacking to support arguments, climate change may have contributed to the frequent drought that (together with other factors) caused scarcity of water and pasture. Based on the available evidence, the line of argument pursued in this report is that environmental change, population growth, and increment in livestock size combined with a host of other factors exacerbated competition over vital resources and the escalation of intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts in the study area.

The link between the condition of resources (scarcity or abundance) and conflict has long been theorized. While some writers argue that competition over scarce resources leads to inter-group conflict, others contend that places endowed with plentiful resources are also condemned to suffer from conflict (Butler/Gates 2010). Both arguments may hold true in different circumstances. However, the intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts in Dassanech area cannot be explained in terms of the 'curse of abundance'. Critchley and Terriff (1993 in Teshome 2010: 183) convincingly state that resources lead to conflict when they become increasingly scarce, when they are essential for human survival, and when they can be physically seized or controlled. This line of argument seems to be consistent with the experience of the Dassanech.

The Dassanech people (also spelt as Daasanach, Dasenach, and Dassanetch, and called Geleb, Merile, and Gabarich), who speak an East Cushitic language, live in Ethiopia and Kenya on the northern shore of Lake Turkana and further north along the Omo River. The Ethiopian Dassanech (the majority) live in Dassanech Woreda (District), South Omo Zone, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR). The population of the Ethiopian Dassanech is estimated at 48,067 (CSA 2007: 84). According to unpublished data from the South Omo Zone Administration, the land area of the Dassanech is 2,575 sq km. Until 2006, the area was part of the administrative unit of Kuraz woreda. Following the 2006 administrative restructuring, Dassanechland was elevated to a district level with its capital at Omorate, some 852 km south of Addis Ababa. The Dassanech district is divided into 40 units called kebele. A kebele is the lowest administrative unit responsible for government functions such as local administration, the collection of tax, provision of extension service and food aid, elections, etc. Except for Omorate (the capital of the district), which hosts migrants and local people, all other kebeles are inhabited by agro-pastoral Dassanech communities.

Traditionally, the Dassanech are divided into eight territorial sections (*emeto*). These include the Shirr, Inkoria, Narich, Elele, Riele, Oro, Randal, and Kuoro. Despite the recent re-organization of the Dassanech society into 'modern' administrative units by the government, the *emeto* structure remains strong and functional throughout the Dassanech territory. Territorial sec-

tions, which are seen as identity markers of the residents, are autonomous in terms of managing internal affairs such as resource use, transfer of generational power, religious/ritual functions, offensive/defensive actions, raiding, and conflict resolution. Furthermore, the Dassanech are divided into eight exogamous and non-territorial clans (*turo*), namely, Turinyerim, Fargar, Galbur, Turat, Ili, Mur, Edze, and Tiyeme. The clans reside in all territorial sections, although each section may not have all eight clans.

Today, the Dassanech people are predominantly agro-pastoralists, who complement their income from livestock production with cultivation of crops on the flooded banks of the Omo River and fishing. The Dassanech claim to have lost much of their lands to Kenya in the south and in the west during the last century. The loss of land translated to massive decreases in the numbers of their livestock, which forced many people to adopt alternative livelihood strategies: cultivation and fishing.¹ It was this historical process that turned the primarily pastoral people into primarily agro-pastoral communities. Cattle and goats represent the most commonly raised and highly valued livestock. Besides, the Dassanech also raise sheep, donkeys, and in some parts camels. Sorghum is the staple food crop grown in the area. In addition to sorghum, the Dassanech grow some maize and beans.

The degree of dependence of the Dassanech on these different economic activities vary from one territorial section to another. The Shiir (the largest group), the Narich, the Oro, and the Kuoro combine livestock and crop production. The Inkoria and the Randal rely heavily on livestock production, while the Elele and Riele count more on cultivation and fishing² and less on animal husbandry. The variations in the degree of dependence on different economic activities may be explained in terms of proximity to the Omo River, loss of animals that necessitated reliance on other activities, and the suitability of locations for the types of production. The lakeshore is reported to be more suitable for cattle than for goats. The riverbank is best suited for flood retreat cultivation. While those who raise large numbers of goats (e.g., the Inkoria) tend to sell their goats to buy food, those who raise cattle have to grow their own food because selling cattle to buy food is less common in Dassanech.

The Dassanech are surrounded by four ethnic groups (namely, the Turkana, the Gabra, the Nyangatom, and the Hamar), who are considered as enemies (*kiz*) because of a long history of conflict.² The Turkana and the Gabra are located in Kenya, while the Nyangatom and the Hamar are Ethiopians. As indicated earlier, the conflict between the Dassanech and their neighbors may be explained largely in terms of pasture and water scarcity and certain cultural factors. The alleged involvement of external agencies (e.g., commercial raiders and elements of the Kenyan security force) seems to be changing the dynamics of cross-border conflict.³ Local communities,

1 A small group of Dassanech called Dhies (part of the Riele territorial section) lives around the northern shore of Lake Turkana and largely depends on fishing.

2 Although they do not share physical borders, the Arbore, the Kara, the Somali, the Toposa in Southern Sudan, and the Pokot in Kenya are called *gaal kunno* ('our people') and treated as fellow associates.

3 Since cross-border conflict is not the focus of the present research, the issue will not be covered in detail.

local and regional governments, and NGOs operating in the area have been organizing repeated peace meetings. Despite these efforts, the conflict between the Dassanech and their neighbors continue to escalate.

The Dassanech have been studied by many researchers such as Uri Almagor (1978, 1979, 1983, 1986) on affinity and bond partnership, the generation-set system and confrontations, and the center-periphery relations; Claudia Carr (1977) on crisis in pastoralism; Neal Sobania (1994) on center-periphery relations; Peggy Elfman (2005) on women and their parts in society; Yvuan Houtteman (2007, 2010) on concepts of illness, healing, and homicide; Toru Sagawa (2008, 2009, 2010) on peace and war, automatic rifles, social order and inter-ethnic relations; Yohannes Gebre-Michael and others (2005) on conflict; and Yntiso Gebre (2011) on inter-ethnic conflicts and customary conflict resolution mechanisms. None of the studies conducted thus far seriously explored the connection between environmental change, food insecurity, and conflict.

The present research was undertaken between 1 June and 23 July 2011 in two trips to South Omo Zone. During the first trip that lasted until 11 June, relevant documents from zonal offices were obtained; five zonal level government officials and experts were interviewed. During the second trip (10 to 22 July 2011), seven *woreda* level officials and experts and 13 Dassanech pastoralists from three villages (Hadho, Koro, and Rate) were interviewed.⁴ Moreover, five focus group discussions were held with the elderly men (two groups), adult women, a mixture of men and women, and the youth. Additionally, different literature sources (e.g., ethnographic accounts), official documents (e.g., unpublished reports), and statistical records (e.g., livestock size) have been reviewed and incorporated in different parts of the report as deemed necessary. Data acquired during a previous research on pastoral conflict and conflict resolution mechanisms conducted in 2009/10 have also been used in this report.

The report is organized into five sections. This introductory section is followed by a discussion on the state of local conflict in the study area. In this section attempts are made to describe the types of conflict, the major actors, and the trends in the conflict dynamics. Section three focuses on the relationship between food insecurity and conflict. More specifically, this section touches on perceptions about and reasons for food insecurity, the link between production short-fall and conflict, and the implication of dependency on food aid for conflict. The fourth section is devoted to the presentation of conflict resolution mechanisms, especially the institutions, actors, and levels involved. The conclusion represents the last section of the report.

4 The Koro live close to the Dassanech-Turkana border, the Hado close to the Dassanech-Gabra and Dassanech-Hamar border, and Rate inhabit the border between Dassanech and the Nyangatom. The three specific research sites, located far apart, were selected to understand the dynamics of inter-ethnic conflict from different places.

2. Local Conflicts in Dessanech

2.1 Intra-ethnic conflicts

The most common and serious disputes within Dessanech society are related to women and livestock. Disputes related to women are caused by acts of adultery, taking a married woman as a wife/lover, causing pre-marital pregnancy, rape, forced marriage (bride-capture), and failure to complete bride-wealth payment. Sometimes some individuals/families are agitated to forcefully take the livestock of others when the latter fail to fulfill their duties, such as completing the payment of bride-wealth, servicing debt, or taking responsibility for any wrongdoing. In addition, theft and other forms of misconduct may lead to inter-personal and/or inter-family conflicts.

How about intra-ethnic conflict over land and water? The culture of sharing (including the sharing of land and water) represents part of the survival strategy of the Dessanech pastoralists. The spatial and temporal variability of these vital resources necessitated interdependence and cooperation rather than conflict over such resources. Although territorial sections are believed to control certain geographic locations, access to pasture and water has always been open to guests from other Dessanech sections that are expected only to acknowledge the occupancy rights of the hosts. This has been the norm rather than the exception and still is today. Dessanech herders are reported to engage in arguments and sometimes physical fights over the arrangement and prioritization of resource use. Traditionally, according to informants, such low profile disputes were never meant to deny access to resources and never led to killings.

In recent years, however, resource scarcity caused deadly intra-ethnic conflicts over pastureland. In 1987, two Dessanech groups from the same territorial section (Shiir) clashed over grazing land in a place called Qorobilil (around the northern shore of Lake Turkana) and two herders were killed. Second, in 1989, two other groups fought over pastureland in Lokdinya (around the same lakeshore) and exchanged gunfire. A third incident that led to the death of one herder is reported to have occurred near Neberemus area in the last five years (informants do not remember the exact date). Fourth, the Narich people in Hadho area reported to have experienced armed confrontation with their hosts (fellow Dessanech) over the use of grazing land and water in the lakeshore. The elders from the host group intervened to prevent bloodshed and ensured that the guests had access to the resources as usual.

Taking the life of a fellow Dessanech is *nyogich* (crude equivalent of sin or pollution) and the killer gets polluted or becomes ritually impure. Killing another Dessanech in revenge for a previous killing or even socially interacting with a killer is also considered as polluting oneself. Many Dessanech seem to be in a state of disbelief that nowadays they are killing each other over land and water that they should be sharing. An elderly man remarked:

“A Dassanech does not kill another Dassanech because it is *nyogich* [...] When we quarrel, sometimes we fight with sticks. Killing your own people even by mistake would cause the swelling of the belly and death. People who killed other Dassanech live in the bush on their own. They are not allowed to live and interact with other people before undergoing cleansing rituals [...] You do not kill someone who killed your family member in revenge, as that is like committing a double *nyogich*.” (Koro, 18 July 2011)

The Dassanech have customary dispute resolution mechanisms to address intra-ethnic conflicts. Whenever possible, disputes between individuals or families are resolved at the family, age-set, or neighborhood level with the help of somebody who has mediation skills. Cases that cannot be managed at these levels are reported to the *arra* – the traditional council of judges found in every major Dassanech village. The Dassanech rarely report intra-ethnic conflicts to the formal law enforcement agencies such as the police or the court. This is confirmed by the Dassanech informants in the study villages and authorities of the district court and the police department located in Omorate town.

2.2 Inter-ethnic conflicts

As noted in the introduction, the Dassanech are surrounded by four ethnic groups whom they consider as enemies, due to a history of conflict largely over grazing land and water. In the past, from the Dassanech perspective, conflicts occurred intermittently and reconciliation lasted for several years. Since recent years, according to informants, the frequency and intensity of conflicts increased and peace initiatives repeatedly failed. This section presents the historical and current state of conflicts between the Dassanech and their four neighbors.

2.2.1 Dassanech vs. Hamar

The Dassanech and the Hamar had times of peace and trust as well as times of conflict. According to the perspectives of Dassanech informants, their Hamar neighbors lived in a place called Asho and Mount Goromsa was the border between the two groups. It appears that some 150 years ago, the Dassanech and the Hamar lived in peace and used to visit each other and share grazing land and water points. An elderly man noted:

“We used to invite them [the Hamar] from their homeland in Asho. Our animals grazed together. Conflict started during my grandfather’s time, it intensified during my father’s days, and got worse today. Over the years, the Hamar kicked us out of such border grazing areas as Zersia, Dhibile, Goromsa, Dara, Aymun, Gerlanta, Duf, Loya, Qadite, Longia, Nangay, and Napay.⁵ Then, we retreated to Narema area, which again became a conflict scene.” (Hado,

⁵ The informant was assisted by other people sitting around in listing the names. He stated that Dhibile and Gerlanta are taken by the Hamar. Later on, it became evident that the Dassanech use these two places when they are in peace with the Hamar.

19 July 2011)

At the present, the resource-related conflicts arise over the use of such grazing areas as Surge, Elzante, Gerlem, Fejej, Narema, Matachew, Dhibile, and Gerlanta. During peace time, the two groups share the resources and when conflict arises, they either abandon the respective area or continue to use it with caution and worries. The Dassanech abandoned places like Karberet, Elgente, Markulte (Kizo), and Dongia due to the drying up of permanent water points.

The main sources of conflict between the Dassanech and Hamar include competition over pasture and water points, livestock raid/theft, and killings for retaliation or honor. Conflict between the two groups often occurs along their common border where pasture and water are available. Drought and resource depletion is increasingly forcing the Dassanech and the Hamar to maintain control over available resources. Many Dassanech villagers displaced by the Turkana from the western side of the Omo River took refuge with their fellow Dassanech on the eastern side of the river (in the direction of the Hamar territory). Due to the steady growth of human and animal populations, the carrying capacity of Dassanechland dwindled. Informants indicated that due to the depletion of grazing areas, they have been forced to take their cattle to risky border places. The Hamar have also been advancing southward to exploit pasture and water in the border areas. Livestock raids/thefts and homicides intensify whenever the two groups converge in the same area.

According to the Dassanech *woreda* police department, between September 2009 and July 2010, the Hamar attacked the Dassanech twelve times, killed eight people, injured two others, and raided an unknown number of livestock. The study revealed (though detailed records are lacking) that the Dassanech have also been involved in offensive actions (in retribution or otherwise) that led to loss of lives and property in Hamar. Further research is needed to understand the Hamar side of the story.

2.2.2 Dassanech vs. Nyangatom

The Dassanech and the Nyangatom ethnic groups had been under one administration for a long time (first as Geleb *woreda* and later as Kuraz *woreda*). In 2006, Kuraz *woreda* was split into Dassanech and Nyangatom *woredas* as part of the restructuring of certain districts in different parts of Ethiopia based on population size, logistic factors, and justified local demands for district status. According to informants and historical records (Tsega-Ab 2005), the two ethnic groups had amicable co-existence and cooperation during the reign of Emperor Menelik. The historically cooperative relationship and peaceful co-existence gave way to animosity later in time. The first serious conflict is reported to have occurred around 1950 when a Dassanech herder killed an elderly Nyangatom woman in Nakwa (or Kibish), where the two groups lived together (Sagawa 2010). In the late 1970s, sporadic conflict between the two groups culminated in a major war at Lophitar around Kibish when the Dassanech attacked the Nyangatom. Soon after, the Nyangatom launched a retaliatory attack on Kelem area in Dassanech. After the Kelem

war, the Dassanech carried out an assault on the Nyangatom at Nawoyahafe around Kibesh area. In the 1970s, the Dassanech had an advantage over the Nyangatom, partly because the latter had been involved in battles with other neighbors, mainly the Kara and the Hamar (Sagawa 2010).

In the 1980s, the introduction of modern arms, such as AK-47 automatic rifles to Nyangatom from the southern Sudan changed the balance of power, and the Dassanech became the first victims. The Nyangatom obtained weapons from the Toposa of Sudan during the Sudanese civil war that increased modern arms trade in the region. The Toposa, with whom the Nyangatom share a common language and culture, had not only supplied weapons but also formed an alliance with the Nyangatom against their enemies. In the late 1980s, the two groups attacked the Dassanech and destroyed three villages. The most violent clash was the one that took place at Selegn village, during which hundreds of Dassanech are reported to have perished in a few hours (Sagawa 2010). After acquiring modern arms in the early 1990s, the Dassanech recovered from the devastating crisis and tried to launch attacks on the Nyangatom at Nakwa. Although no large-scale assaults took place since the 1990s Nakwa war, the Nyangatom-Dassanech relations remain very tense to date. The nature of the conflict has changed from large-scale armed conflict and raids to small-scale ambushes and raids/thefts by small groups, and this has posed a tremendous challenge for peace efforts. In 2010, small groups of Dassanech perpetrators entered the Nyangatom territory six times, killed four people and injured 16 others; in the same year, the Nyangatom perpetrators entered the Dassanech territory seven times and killed three people and injured one other (Gebre 2011).

The study reveals that the conflict between the Nyangatom and the Dassanech increased and the multiple peace agreements reached with the help of *woreda* officials and NGOs failed. The Dassanech-Nyangatom conflicts may be explained in terms of competition over land and water, the strong culture of retaliation (revenge killings and raids), and the failure to attain genuine reconciliation.⁶ As the result of the conflict, the Dassanech are reported to have lost their traditional grazing land to the Nyangatom. For example, the Dassanech informants claimed that the Nyangatom forced them out of their traditional pasturelands such as Gima, Hamite, Kuraz, Lochober, Loroqoy, Loturtur, and Nakwa. Moreover, because of security concerns both groups currently do not use the resource (pastures and water) rich Kare and Qorei Abowole areas at their common border. It is also important to note that the Dassanech abandoned some grazing land (e.g., Borkonech) due to drying up of water points. As a result of all this, the Dassanech living on the Western side of the Omo River are left with a substantially reduced number of grazing areas located in Kalam, Tolitale, and around the northern shore of the Lake Turkana (e.g., Abalakua, Korema, Lokdinya, Qes el, Qorobilil, Tirte, Yerle, etc.). The lakeshore pastureland is the last resort and the most reliable source of grass and water for the Dassanech, who depend heavily on cattle raising.

⁶ Conflict used to erupt due to the failure of one party to implement decisions made during peace initiatives. When one party fails to return raided/stolen animals and/or to bring criminals to justice, the other party is agitated to take revenge.

2.2.3 Dassanech vs. Turkana

The Dassanech lost their traditional pastureland to the Turkana pastoralists since the colonial period (see also Almagor 1979, 1986). Nene Mburu (2003) reported that the British colonial government controlled livestock herding by local pastoralists around the border area of Kenya, Sudan, and Ethiopia thereby increasing competition for scarce pastures between pastoral peoples. These policies caused an intensification of hostility between the Dassanech and the neighboring communities, particularly the Turkana and Gabra in Kenya (Sagawa 2010). The longstanding conflict between the Dassanech and the Turkana further escalated in recent years. Fragmented reports from Dassanech *Woreda* Police Department reveal that between November 2008 and October 2010, the Turkana attacked the Dassanech 24 times during which the former killed 19 people, injured nine others, and raided 3,423 goats and six donkeys.

On the whole, the root causes of the conflict between the Dassanech and the Turkana include land alienation, frequent livestock raids, water claims for fishing, theft of fishing nets, and killing of herders and other people. Since the colonial period, the Dassanech lost control over the rich pasture in Berbere, Ilam, Herum, Lomodhan, Lumiyana, Narwot, and Neswat (Todonyang) – all currently under Turkana control. Moreover, the remaining grazing lands in the border areas such as Loqongole and Natade have often been abandoned due to security concerns. The Dassanech informants underlined that the cross-border conflict has taken a new form in that the fighters/raiders coming from the Turkana side are highly sophisticated and allegedly supported by certain interest groups such as livestock traders, corrupt officials, and elements of the Kenyan General Service Unit. The sophistication of the Turkana fighters is explained in relation to use of vehicles, better weapons (e.g., G3), communication equipments, helmets, etc. Raided animals are often immediately sold or shared among different people and dispersed, which makes retrieval rather difficult.

2.2.4 Dassanech vs. Gabra

The Gabra of Kenya who share a border with the Dassanech are predominantly pastoralists. The Inkoria, one of the eight territorial sections of the Dassanech, live in close proximity with the Gabra. The historical relationship between the Dassanech and the Gabra is characterized by both conflict and peaceful co-existence. The Dassanech remember certain landmarks that shaped the nature of their relationship with the Gabra. The so-called Illeret massacre of several Dassanech boys during their circumcision seclusion remained vivid in the memories of many people. The Dassanech culture provides that during seclusion periods, newly circumcised boys should not touch weapons. Therefore, the victims of the Illeret massacre were unarmed easy prey for the Gabra attackers. The second incident that poisoned the relationship between the two neighboring groups was the assassination of a prominent Gabra leader by a Dassanech man during a peace meeting at Ilolo, near Illeret. After this incident, the Gabra mounted repeated attacks on the Dassanech to revenge for their leader's death. The third major incident was a

large-scale attack the Dassanech launched on the Gabra and the nearby Kenyan security force during which many Gabra perished.

The major causes of conflict between the Dassanech and the Gabra are land claims, livestock raiding, and individualized killings. The Dassanech on the Gabra side, in defiance of the international boundary that divides their ancestral homeland into Ethiopian and Kenyan territories, continue to use their traditional grazing lands located up to 200 km deep inside the legal territory of Kenya. The Gabra are opposed to the fact that the Dassanech continue to enjoy access to grazing land in Kenyan territory. Most of the small-scale conflicts between the two groups took place in such places as Naibar and Asuma on the Kenya territory. Sometimes, however, the Gabra perpetrated attacks on Ethiopian soil. In November 2009, for example, they raided 675 goats and ten cattle from a place called Kokei in a border *kebele* known as Bubua. Inter-ethnic raids/thefts of livestock to meet social and economic desires seem to be common between the two groups. Members of the Dassanech and the Gabra ethnic groups kill members of ethnic groups considered enemies for honor and status change.

2.3 Major actors in conflict

2.3.1 The youth

The youth are at the center of pastoral conflicts because they are the ones to commit offensive and/or defensive actions. The youth are brought up in an environment that provides the social ingredients to become fearless, courageous, and heroic. The social environment also generates competition and rivalry. The youth in each territorial section are responsible for the protection of territorial borders and revenge against external offenders. Success in offensive and/or defensive action is attached only to the generation-sets or age-sets involved rather than to the entire group. This places pressure on generation-sets and age-sets to leave an impressive mark behind. Those who have killed members of an enemy ethnic group and raided animals from such groups are praised. It is not uncommon to observe unconstrained, uncoordinated, and independent actions by small groups, which may have devastating consequences for the larger community. The greatest worry of many elders is that the reckless behavior of youngsters provokes unexpected counterattacks. Hence, the tradition requires that the fighters get permission and blessing from their *izam* (fathers in the age-system) and rituals performed by the relevant clans before they engage in offensive/defensive acts.

However, there are moments when certain youths take action without securing permission. Based on such incidences, some informants felt that the power of elders has been eroded, while others noted that the youngsters still respect the authority of elders. It appears that when the frequency of attacks and counter-attacks increases, the degree of tolerance on the part of the elders also changes. The elders are aware of the fact that youth action or inaction may lead to unpredictable consequences. Given the volatile nature of the area and in the face of repeated

enemy attacks, it would be naïve for them to preach peace and curse war. In the best interest of their society, they make a delicate balance between restraining the youth to attain peace and approving their aggressive stance to maximize deterrence.

The behavior and action of the youth are the results of a number of factors rather than a function of elders control alone. Senior age-sets within the same generation-set and peers or age-mates within the same age-set could motivate, constrain, and discipline the behaviors of fellow youngsters. Also, women are reported to play a key role in inciting violence through acts or behavior that would humiliate the cowardly and reward the brave.

2.3.2 Senior generation-set

Apart from their division into territorial sections and clans, the Dessanech people have an age system that divides people into generation-sets and age-groups. A particular generation-set in power is led by the council of arra that consists of challeba (the ultimate decision-makers), nemo (advisors and coordinators) and tolol (implementers, foot-soldiers). The arra plays a crucial role in initiating or resolving major conflicts. The youth cannot engage in any major assault against another group without the knowledge, permission, and blessing of these highly respected and feared elderly. Moreover, it is the elderly who participate in reconciliation representing their territorial section or the entire ethnic group. The management of inter-ethnic disputes by elders can encompass violent actions and/or peaceful solutions. Regarding violent action, according to the informants, four types of offensive/defensive responses may be identified: large-scale, small-scale, emergency, and unauthorized. Large-scale action is organized when an ethnic group suffers a major loss of life and/or livestock in the hands of its enemy. After holding public meetings, the need for retribution at the appropriate time is decided by the senior generation-sets in consultation with the relevant parties, such as the junior office holders, wise/influential individuals, the youngsters, and the ritual specialists. When the appropriate time comes, the warriors are blessed and seen off in a ritualized ceremony.

A small-scale offense is organized by a territorial section to take revenge for a small attack or raid it suffered in the recent or remote past. The participation of the senior generation-set and other relevant parties within the specific section would suffice to give permission and bless the fighters in a low-key ceremony. Emergency offense takes place when certain age-sets or family members decide to conduct hot-pursuit immediately after an enemy attack or raid with or without permission and blessing from the elders. The intention could be to take revenge or to track raided animals and get them back. The above three forms of actions are considered justified and approved by the senior generation-set.

When youngsters realize that the elders are unlikely to grant permission, they tend to go for unauthorized offense. The elders, who generally favor peace over war, seriously disapprove provocative actions. Depending on the gravity of the action, they may order the whipping of the

perpetrators, return raided animals to the owners, and/or send a word of apology to the group that was being attacked. In July 2011, several youngsters who were planning/preparing to take revenge against the Hamar without the permission of the elders were caught and whipped in the nab (open meeting place) on the orders of the challeba.

The elders also make decisions to resolve disputes peacefully. After major conflicts or a series of repeated small clashes, elders would express the need to initiate a peace process through peace messengers, who would carry white ostrich feathers tied to a tree branch as a peace symbol. When the other party agrees to resolve the conflict peacefully, the elders would organize internal meetings to discuss about the reconciliation. Then delegates (senior, wise, experienced, and articulate elders) would be identified to attend the peace negotiations and deliberations. Such meetings almost always end with agreement and ritual performances (by elders) such as splashing milk and water on participants, placing the belly fat of a sacrificial goat on their neck, rubbing hands/body with stomach discharges, holding fresh green grass/leaves, breaking and burying spears or guns, cursing evil deeds, and blessing peaceful activities.

2.3.3 Women

The male youths in Dassanech are brought up in a social environment that encourages fearlessness, selflessness, heroism, and sacrifice for honor. Women, especially girls, are reported to be playing a significant role in triggering anger and driving men into violence. They tend to challenge docility through nagging and ridiculing directly, for example by questioning the manliness of a particular person or age-set or indirectly by expressing their utter defenselessness despite the presence of boys/men in the community. Moreover, women/girls praise aggressiveness through emotional yelling, singing, and gift giving when the men return home with victory in killing and/or raids (Houtteman 2010: 140). While bringing a sense of ultimate pride and heroism to those who emerged victorious, such acts are reported to motivate many others to follow suit in pursuit of similar treatment. A woman explained how she nagged her husband over night to take revenge against the Turkana, who killed their son and stole their cattle:

“One morning, my husband hassled my son to look after the cattle heading to the grazing field. My son did not even finish the food I gave him. [...] He did not come back. He was killed by the Turkana, who also stole the cows [...] At night, I cried [...] the calves were mooing because their mothers were taken. I said to my husband, ‘What are you going to do about our son, who did not return to finish his food? [...] What are you going to do about the calves mooing all night?’ My husband started to sigh and sing war songs and left early in the morning with his friends to take revenge [...] The next day, they returned home singing victory songs. I felt vindicated.” (Koro, 16 July 2011)

2.3.4 Diviners/magicians

Certain clans are believed to have power over certain natural phenomena such as drought, diseases and social events such as war and raids. For example, the Galbur are believed to handle water and crocodiles, and the Turat to heal fire burns. Likewise, the Turinyerim are believed to cure snakebites and make rain at times of drought, and the Fargar to heal animal disease and avoid flies. Moreover, the Turinyerim and the Fargar are believed to have divine and/or magical power to ensure victory over enemies during war and/or raids. Hence, members of the two clans are asked to perform certain pre-offense rituals, and they accompany or lead the fighters all the way to the enemy land. Different types and levels of ritual continue when the fighters return home after killing enemies and/or raiding animals. All informants interviewed believed in the power of the clan diviners.

2.3.5 Government institutions

At the district level, the formal government institutions with jurisdiction over security and law-enforcement matters are the *woreda* administration, the police, and the court. Since almost all intra-ethnic disputes are resolved through customary dispute resolution mechanisms (at family, neighborhood, and *arra* levels), the formal law-enforcement institutions play a very limited role. However, external attacks are brought to the attention of the police and the administration. The police force in Dessanech is inadequately staffed and equipped to monitor the border areas and prevent inter-ethnic conflict. Due to logistical constraints, incident reports reach police posts often long after the event, which makes it difficult for the police to take action. Until recently, there had been only two police posts (at Neberemus and Bubua) near the Ethio-Kenyan border.

With the objective to enhance community policing, new police posts have been established at Selegn, Toltale, Sirimiriet, Hadho, and Ocholoch. The construction of a new police post at Narema (Dassanech-Hamar border) is underway. These are some of the areas where inter-ethnic clashes have occurred. The establishment of some of the new police posts is reported to have encouraged some Dassanech pastoralists to return to villages that they had abandoned due to security concerns. However, according to informants, the officers assigned in each post are few in number and lack many resources to deter Turkana and Gabra attacks.

2.3.6 CEWARN and NGOs

In the context of conflict in Dassanech area, the role of many NGOs has been that of supporting peace initiatives (e.g., peace meetings/festivals) and capacity building of peace committees. In addition to supporting the local peace initiatives (especially in sponsoring peace accords), the

intergovernmental *Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism* (CEWARN) undertakes early warning works through its field reporters, receives and keeps incident reports, and facilitates bilateral communication and border commission meetings on inter-ethnic conflict. The major NGOs that used to operate in Dassanech include Mary Corps, the *Ethiopian Pastoralist Research and Development Association* (EPARDA), Pact Ethiopia, and the *Atowokis Ekisil Pastoralist Development Association* (AEPDA). During the research time, all but AEPDA had terminated operation in the area. Regarding the role played by NGOs, the locals have mixed reactions. Some informants underlined that some three years ago, there was relative peace in Dassanech due to the active involvement of NGOs in supporting peace initiatives.

For example, the role played by EPARDA in terms of establishing and activating the local peace committees is believed to have led to relative peace and stability at the time of the project operation. The recent escalation of conflict coincided with the end of NGO activities in the area. The enactment of the charities and societies proclamation in Ethiopia (Negarit Gazeta 2009) significantly restricted the participation of civil society organizations or NGOs in certain areas including conflict. Hence, some NGOs (e.g., EPARDA) abandoned their mandate to work on conflict, while others (e.g., AEPDA) seem to be operating under limited space, increased scrutiny, and unclear terrain due to lack of clear guidelines.⁷

In July 2011, the peace committees were not active as evidenced by the termination of regular community peace meetings and the absence of refreshment training. It appears that some NGOs withdrew before the beneficiaries were ready to take over and run the projects on their own. Apart from complaints on the issue of sustainability, informants expressed discomfort by the way the NGOs and *woreda* officials hassled some elders to attend hastily organized peace meetings without adequate preparation. In such meetings, the participants felt pressurized by the organizers to accept deals that they would otherwise reject.

2.4 Recent changes in conflict trends

Changes in the conflict dynamics in Dassanech area have been observed. These changes are manifested through the onset of intra-ethnic conflict over resources, rise in the frequency of conflict occurrence, alleged involvement of elements of the Kenyan security force, and an alleged commercial interest behind raids. First, though very limited in scale and occurrence, deadly intra-ethnic conflicts over access to land/water took place in the last six years for the first time

⁷ The Ethiopian Charities and Societies Proclamation No. 621/2009 recognizes three major categories of civil society organizations: Ethiopian charities and societies (ECS), Ethiopian resident charities and societies (ERCS), and foreign charities (FC). The ECS, that can engage in all areas of civil society interventions including governance and human rights, are allowed to receive not more than 10 percent of their funds from foreign sources. The ERCS could receive up to 90 percent of their revenues from foreign countries. The foreign charities could receive any amount that they could secure. However, the ERCS and FC are barred from working on rights issues (governance, human rights, etc.) using funds from foreign sources.

in the history of the Dessanech. Traditionally, disputes between herders over the arrangement of resource use (i.e., turn-taking or prioritization) were resolved through negotiation or physical fights with sticks rather than with firearms. The idea of denying access to vital resources to fellow Dessanech and killing each other for resources are reported to be new developments.

Second, the frequency of conflicts in Dessanech increased, and this became evident more in the last three years than ever before. Although there exist no benchmark records to compare changes in the frequency of conflict occurrence, both community members and government officials underlined that, in the past, conflict occurred intermittently and reconciliation lasted for years (sometimes up to ten years). Today, on the contrary, peace deals are broken shortly (within days, weeks or months) after agreements and unprovoked attacks are perpetrated repeatedly.

Third, the allegations about commercial raiding and the involvement of elements of the Kenyan security force in attacks and raids is a new development in the conflict dynamics. Information obtained during the present research and recent studies in the area (Gebre-Michael et al 2005; Teshome 2010) point to the presence of commercial interest groups (e.g., traders, arms dealers, and paid professional raiders) behind livestock raiding and conflict in fishing areas. Some Dessanech informants reported to have personally witnessed the participation of some Kenyan security forces in Dessanech-Turkana conflicts. Others reported to have produced evidence to *woreda* authorities to support their claims. The proofs the local people handed over to *woreda* authorities included heavy weapons, shells of heavy weapons, military uniforms, and identity cards of Kenyan security forces.

3. Food security/insecurity and its relation to conflict in Dessanech

3.1 Livelihood strategies

The economy of the Dessanech is based on livestock production, crop production, and fishing (in that order of social importance). Animals (especially cattle) are given high social value and represent status symbols. Hence, they are not meant to be sold or killed except in drastic situations (e.g., food shortage) and socially/culturally justified reasons (e.g., festivity). The youth, the children, and the few adults living in the cattle camp largely subsist on milk and blood. Occasionally, they consume some grain that they bring from the villages, where the majority of people live. While the majority of animals are sent to the cattle camp, some milking cows and small ruminants are kept in the vicinity of the permanent villages.

According to data from the Department of Agriculture, South Omo Zone, the livestock size in Dessanech increased from 599,420 in 2004/2005 to over 844,275 in 2009/2010. The data also reveal that large numbers of animals were lost in this period. Since 2007/2008, for example, the

number of cattle has been decreasing and this coincided with the intensification of drought and escalation of conflicts. The animals may have been lost due to disease, drought, or raids.

Table 1. Estimated livestock population in Dassanech woreda, 2006/2007 - 2010/2011

Year		Livestock Type					Total
Gregorian	Ethiopian	Cattle	Goats	Sheep	Donkeys	Camel	
2009/10	2002	224,621	381,427	224,637	13,285	305	844,275
2008/9	2001	226,867	389,055	229,027	22,556	300	867,805
2007/8	2000	280,380	206,185	156,700	41,172	265	684,702
2006/7	1999	270,000	206,000	156,000	40,000	265	672,265
2005/6	1998	219,380	206,185	105,405	14,144	250	545,364
2004/5	1997	219,380	206,185	156,740	16,850	265	599,420

Source: Department of Agriculture, South Omo Zone

Socially, crop production is given a secondary importance in Dassanech society. However, the daily diets of those living in permanent settlements depend more on grain than animal products. Crop production depends on the traditional flood retreat cultivation (which constitutes the major part) and limited irrigation schemes (which make small contributions). Normally, light rainfall is expected in March and April and flood from highland Ethiopia in the months of June, July and August.⁸ The flood retreat production season spans from September to the end of December. Due to the seasonal variability of rainfall characterized by delay, the production season sometimes spans from November to February. The irrigation schemes utilize windmills supplied by the government and the Society of International Missions (formerly Sudan Interior Mission, SIM) and engine-pumps provided by the government. The number, the total irrigation capacity, and functional status of the windmills and the pumps are summarized below.

Table 2. Irrigation scheme in Dassanech woreda

Irrigation	Supplied by	No.	Capacity (Total ha)	Functional Status		Remarks
				Functional	Out of order	
Windmill	Government	22		0	22	
	SIM	63	31.5	63	63	capacity per unit = 0.5 ha
Pump	Government	51	367	35	15	three different types of pumps with their unit capacity ranging from 3 to 22 hectares

Source: Office of Agriculture, Dassanech Woreda

⁸ These seasonal cycles of rain and flooding are used to monitor and predict food security/insecurity.

As indicated in the table below, in the last five years the size of cultivated land increased from 6,722.5 ha to 10,974.2 ha. It is obvious from the data that the size of flood retreat cultivation, especially sorghum production, shows significant increase. Although the total area of irrigated land is very small, the size increased by more than twofold in five years. One of the challenges witnessed with the pump irrigation is the cost of fuel and maintenance, which raises serious sustainability concerns. The *woreda* is planning to convince the agro-pastoralists to produce sesame and onion as cash crops on their irrigated fields. At least for now, however, the local people are only interested in producing food crops – particularly sorghum and some maize. After one year, the *woreda* plans to handover the entire management responsibility, including covering the cost of fuel, to the communities. It appears rather ambitious to expect the communities to manage the costly pump irrigation scheme at this early stage. In contrast, the windmill provided by the SIM is likely to be sustainable because of low cost (only Birr 500 per mill) and less complicated maintenance requirement.

Table 3. Cultivated land in hectare in Dassanech Woreda

Year	Sorghum Field		Maize Field		Other Crops*		Cultivated Area (ha)	
	Flood Retreat	Irrigated	Flood Retreat	Irrigated	Flood Retreat	Irrigated	Irrigated	Total
2010/11	9,538	6.5	495	115	489	330.66	452.16	10,974.16
2009/10	3,925	25	35	150	12.5	82	257	4,229.5
2008/9	3,776	80.25	1,081	79.88	153	20	180.13	5,190.13
2007/8	-	-	-	17	-	1	18	18
2006/7	5,704	50	666	143	137	22.5	215.5	6,722.5

Source: Office of Agriculture, Dassanech Woreda

* The other crops (apart from sorghum and maize) grown in Dassanech include beans, sesame, onion, tomato, pepper, banana, groundnut, sweet potato, taro, and mango. All but beans were introduced into Dassanech by the *woreda* department of agriculture in recent years and are still at the trial level.

Due to poor rainfall and absence of flooding in 2008/2009, the total cultivated land in 2009/2010 (4,229.5 ha) was less than the size in the previous years. Apart from this, the 22 big windmills and some of the engine pumps were not functioning. Moreover, fuel shortage (due to unreliability of supply and financial constraints) and maintenance problems contributed to the crop failure in that year. The total size of land cultivated in 2008/2009 was also less than the total area cultivated in 2006/2007 for the same reasons. The 2010/2011 harvest turned out much better than the previous years because it had rained in 2009/2010 and also the *woreda* was better prepared to provide assistance. The year's cultivated area of irrigated sorghum (6.5 ha) was very low due to lack of interest on the part of the people. Since the number of irrigation users is low, people were worried that sorghum crops planted in few fields will be vulnerable to bird attacks. Hence,

according to an agricultural expert of Dassanech *woreda*, they expressed interest in growing vegetables, and that is why the irrigated field of other crops (330.66 ha) was higher that year than ever before.

3.2 Perception and reality of food security/insecurity

3.2.1 The level of food security/insecurity

Although intermittently, many households in Dassanech *woreda* have been receiving emergency food aid for decades now and almost every year since 2004/2005. According to a former Dassanech *woreda* official, in 1998/1999 and 1999/2000, the entire Dassanech *kebeles* received emergency food aid. In 2009/2010, in all 39 *kebeles*, about 30,000 people (almost two-thirds of the total population) were on emergency food assistance.⁹ In 2011, only 10,149 individuals from 14 *kebeles* (including Omorate town) qualified for emergency food assistance. In other words, 26 *kebeles* (most located on the western side of the Omo River) are considered food secure.

However, several informants in one of the 'food secure' *kebeles* visited by the researcher indicated that the emergency aid terminated, while they were still in need of assistance, simply because the *woreda* experts reported to higher officials that the communities were food secure. They further noted that those households who grew crop in the Omo delta close to the lake had enjoyed good harvest, while those who waited for the riverbank flood and some of those who depended on irrigation had got no harvest in that year. Interviews with government officials revealed that in the last few years, the amount of flood substantially decreased for two main reasons: lack of rain and the holding back of water to fill the Gibe dams. Some of the households who trusted the irrigation schemes experienced production failure due to technical problems with the pumps and/or fuel shortage.

Apart from the emergency humanitarian aid, a total of 9,514 people, selected from all 40 *kebeles*, have been receiving aid through the productive safety net program since January 2005.¹⁰ The majority of the recipients (over 8,600 people) are supposed to participate in public work such as the construction of roads, fences, toilets, and waterholes.¹¹ However, these requirements have

⁹ The government has mechanisms to determine the food security status of communities and screen the number of households that deserve humanitarian assistance. In each food insecure *kebele*, not all households are entitled to food aid. The main criteria employed to assess the food security status of communities include food price, weather conditions, crop production, animal health, and human health. The determination of food secure and food insecure households depends on the availability of dependable economic assets at their disposal.

¹⁰ The productive safety net program is a food security strategy that aims at (1) providing households with enough income (cash/food) to meet their food gap thereby protecting their household assets from depletion and (2) building community assets to contribute to addressing the root causes of food insecurity.

¹¹ The aged, the sick, and those physically impaired were given free assistance.

not been enforced and nothing visible has been accomplished through the program. No assessment has been made to find out whether the living conditions of the beneficiaries have improved as a result. Despite the increase in the family size of the participants, the amount of support per month remained the same since the beginning. New recipients have not been accepted despite the growing number of destitute households in the *woreda*.

Of the 39 rural *kebeles*, 28 are located along the Omo River and some of the residents practice cultivation while those living in the remaining eleven *kebeles* reside far away from the river and rely heavily on livestock production. Over the years, agricultural production in the riverbank is reported to have expanded, although rainfall shortage remains to be a serious challenge. The production increase is expressed in terms of the participation of many households in cultivation, the expansion of cultivable land, the selling of agricultural products in Omorate market, the introduction of new crops, and the use of irrigation schemes.

Agricultural extension services are almost non-existent in the eleven *kebeles* located far away from the Omo River. Hence, most people (if not all) in these areas have continued to receive emergency food aid for many years now. This does not mean that the residents are purely nomadic pastoralists. Some of them, particularly those in Narich area, produce sorghum on the alluvial deposit brought by the seasonal river called Keske. It is important to note that some households are considered food secure and denied access to emergency aid, although this caused resentment on the part of some members of the community. From interviews with key informants it became evident that those who receive aid share with those who do not.

3.2.2 Meaning and reasons of food security/insecurity

There is no Dassanech term that adequately represents the concepts of food security and insecurity. The phenomenon of food insecurity is described in terms of prolonged hunger (that may involve related sickness and death) due to the absence of sufficient food to eat. Although the culture of sharing is strong in Dassanech, the poor (those with few or no livestock, no family members in the Omo delta, and those without irrigable land along the river) are the victims of food crises. Those households with many livestock could spare some to buy food. Likewise, households with livestock, family members, and farms in the Omo delta near the lakeshore are likely to survive better than those without. Hence, prolonged hunger does not necessarily affect all households in the same way. The extreme level of food insecurity known to the Dassanech was manifested in malnourishment and death of children, increased death of livestock, large-scale migration of people and animals to the delta and other resource-rich areas, and reliance on food aid.

According to informants, food insecurity is caused mainly by the lack of rain and prolonged drought spells. These phenomena destroy the asset-base of communities thereby rendering the social networks and the sharing culture meaningless simply because there isn't enough to sha-

re. As the livelihood of the Dassanech people depends on livestock production and flood retreat cultivation of sorghum along the Omo River, rainfall is a critical factor for their survival strategy. During the rainy season, Lake Turkana fills up and water flows backward flooding upstream areas. Since the rain makes water and grass available in areas away from the lake and the river, people move with their livestock in different directions to exploit these resources. When the rain stops and the water level in the river and the lake recedes, most of the animals are taken back to the riverbank, the delta, and other permanent water points. The fertile alluvial sediment along the river and the delta is cultivated.

3.2.3 Trends in food security/insecurity

It is difficult to predict food security/insecurity in Dassanech in the future. However, from the interviews with key informants it became clear that food insecurity of households has been increasing despite the intensification of cultivation. Severe food shortage is not viewed as something abnormal. Regarding the future, there are two different indicative trends at play. First, increasing temperature and decreasing precipitation change may negatively affect local livelihoods and food security. Second, the Ethiopian government is trying to make the Omo-Gibe river basin one of the development corridors in the country, and this will have an effect on food security/insecurity of the area.

The development programs currently underway in the area include the construction of dams for hydroelectric power (Gibe I, Gibe II, and Gibe III), the development of 150,000 hectares of sugarcane plantation, and the construction of six sugar factories. Africa Oil and other companies (namely, Agriterro and Tullow) are exploring oil in South Omo Zone in an area that covers 29,465 km². Part of the Dassanech territory is within the exploration area.¹² In the past, the Dassanech communities did not benefit from large-scale agricultural projects such as the former Ethio-Korean state farm and the three recent commercial farms. Neither irrigation schemes nor pasturelands have been developed for the pastoralists to compensate for the land that they lost to these large-scale farms. In view of these facts, the question of how the dam, the sugar, and the oil projects will affect the pastoral communities in the area remains to be seen.

According to the authorities, the plan for pastoralists in the lower Omo valley is to establish permanent settlements and to promote the adoption of irrigated agriculture. The new lifestyle is believed to stop pastoral movement in search of water and grass, the subsequent conflict over resources, and allow efficient provision of social and extension services. The intention is to convince the pastoralists to use the irrigation opportunity and pursue livestock production that focuses on quality rather than quantity. Some of the informants in Dassanech do not seem to have clear information about the planned project and the way it will affect their future. Others who knew about the dams and sugar project expressed worries that the new developments may disrupt their livelihoods and exacerbate inter-ethnic conflicts. Local officials, development

¹² <http://www.tullowoil.com/index.asp?pageid=429>

workers, and some Dessanech viewed the planned grand projects as representing a great development opportunity for the area at large.

3.3 Drought, rainfall, food (in)security and local conflicts

When the dry spells intensify, people and livestock concentrate in resource-rich areas, and it is at this time that resource-related conflicts surface. Among the Dessanech, however, violent conflict is not considered as the only option to address scarcity. Informants stressed the importance of tolerance in the face of threat to save human and animal lives. An elderly man from Rate village stated:

“Some years ago, we moved to Kare [an area between Dessanech and Nyangatom] with our animals. Kare has sufficient grass and water. It is also good for cultivation. Some people decided not to go with us because of the Nyangatom threat [...] Upon arrival, we started sharing the land with them in peace. After some time, they [the Nyangatom] killed my two sons. They killed other boys. They stole our animals. We could have taken revenge. But we said, ‘let our loss be the price for the grass’. We thought that revenge would drive us into more killings and loss of access to grass.” (Rate, 13 July 2011)

Despite the initial tolerance stance of the Dessanech, tension and conflict between the two groups in Kare area escalated as the drought intensified. Rainfall has the capacity to pacify resource-related conflicts in that when it rains tension over resources reduces as the herders would have fallback options elsewhere. The Kare conflict mentioned above, for example, subsided when the Dessanech pulled back following rainfall that made grass and water available in other places. Sometimes herders are reported to tolerate offensive actions and take revenge at the end of the drought period immediately before abandoning the contested area. One informant explained how his group in the 1980s tolerated the Hamar attacks and retaliated when the rainfall gave them a breathing space:

“There was no grass and no water here. Some of our people went to the Omo. We went to Narema [an area between Dessanech and Hamar]. Narema was our land. The Hamar claim that it is theirs [...] When we arrived there, the Hamar said, ‘Go to the Omo. You have an option there. We cannot go anywhere for lack of other option’. But we told them that some of our people already went to the Omo. The delta is not sufficient for the residents and the many new comers [...] The Hamar started to kill our people. [...] We did not want to give-up Narema. We agreed to pay a blood price for the grass [...] When the rain came, we started to move south. We sent the elderly, women, and children together with most of the livestock. We kept few animals behind with some 30 strong men for few days. We launched a major attack on a Hamar village and raided their animals. Most of us chased the animals deep into our territory. Few sharp-shooters and fast-runners stayed behind to stop the Hamar from tracking us [...] We all escaped unharmed.” (Hadho, 19 July 2011)

According to Dassanech informants, conflicts arise and escalate in wet seasons and at times of abundance for a number of other reasons. In wet seasons, the availability of water and food allows fighters to travel long distance and hide in the bush for days to ambush their victims. Abundance allows communities to organize cultural events and major ceremonies. During feasts heroes and their families are honored through songs and special treatments. Some informants noted that during such ceremonies some youth are agitated to perpetrate killing for fame and prestige.

As mentioned above, the Dassanech people have been receiving emergency humanitarian aid for several decades, though intermittently. Many relief aid recipients are reported to be selling their emergency food aid to buy liquor transported from Omorate town to the villages by young dealers. The consumption of alcohol is on the rise throughout the Dassanechland and is becoming one of the causes of disputes. In 2008, for example, a peace deal signed in 2006 between the Dassanech and the Turkana collapsed when three drunken Dassanech boys killed three Turkana in Nesuwat village, Kenya. The Dassanech *Woreda* administration brought the perpetrators to justice and tried to convince the Turkana communities that the incident was a regrettable tragedy caused by deviant youths. However, the Turkana launched repeated attacks on the Dassanech in retaliation.

4. Conflict Management/Resolution in Dassanech

4.1 Coping with conflicts

The Dassanech seem to have different perspectives on the management of intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts. Disputes between individuals, families or communities within Dassanech are expected to be resolved peacefully with or without the involvement of the *arra* council. Culturally, violent actions and acts of retribution against fellow Dassanech are strongly disapproved and punished. This does not mean individuals and families always refrain from taking the law into their hand. For example, physically harming someone in revenge and confiscating the livestock of people who failed to pay debt are not uncommon. However, if reported to the *arra*, such actions will have serious consequences.

Concerning inter-ethnic conflicts, both peaceful resolutions and violent actions are viewed as legitimate options. Depending on a number of considerations (e.g., restoration of pride, the need to take revenge, retrieval of livestock, risks of counter-attack, etc.), the Dassanech may opt for an offensive action rather than for a peace negotiation. As long as the violent action was directed at one of the traditional enemies, people would easily understand the justification. In the past, people waited for the opportune moment to take revenge. In recent years, however, the strong government pressure on communities to apprehend criminals and return raided or

stolen livestock changed perception about the timing of retribution. One informant described the situation as follows:

“When they [the Dassanech] take revenge against their neighbors months or years later, they are considered as the first offenders. This is because the attacks they suffered in the hands of their enemies are forgotten as time passed. Nowadays, they retaliate as soon as they are attacked to make it a justified self-defense. In May [2011], the Dassanech killed 22 Turkana following the death of three Dassanech in the hands of the Turkana earlier in the day. This is why conflict is escalating today.” (Omorate, 10 July 2011)

By and large, however, the Dassanech people seem to prefer peaceful resolutions of conflict. The elders and district level government officials made repeated efforts to reach out to their counterparts in the neighboring ethnic groups to launch peace talks. Moreover, the officials and communities have track record of apprehending criminals and returning raided/stolen animals to the rightful owners. In July 2011, during the research period, the Dassanech *woreda* officials were busy organizing three-pronged peace negotiations with the Hamar, Nyangatom, and Turkana. The negotiations with the Hamar and Nyangatom involved the retrieval of livestock, and the Dassanech negotiators expressed readiness to respect the terms of the agreements. Given the history of repeated failed peace deals at the local, district, and border commission levels, the Dassanech are not optimistic that the usual style of peace negotiations would make any difference. Hence, the belief in self-defense and violent retribution as having deterrent effects is very strong.

4.2 Institutions of conflict management: The *Arra*

As indicated earlier, the council of the *arra* is the most powerful decision-making entity in each territorial section in Dessanech. The *arra* is formed through an initiation ceremony held once in several decades for the entire Dassanech.¹³ All circumcised members of all generation-sets are eligible to attend the inauguration ceremony. However, experienced elders and influential young men are recommended and encouraged by their peers and the community to participate in the ceremony. Under rare circumstances some women (specially pregnant women) are allowed to take part in the inauguration.¹⁴ The delegates represent their sections and their respective generation-sets. After a month of ritual performances, the delegates return to their respective sections to serve as religious experts, political leaders, and judges. They exercise power over the secular and religious lives of the people. In worldly matters that concern their sections, the *arra* represent the ultimate decision-making body. In the realm of divine sanctity, they are

¹³ Some informants noted that the *arra* inauguration is held every 100 years and others are of the opinion that it could be held even in 50 or 60 years when the number of active *arra* decreases.

¹⁴ The women who participated in *arra* ceremony become cooks for the *arra* council in session.

believed to control the fertility of both humans and animals. The last *arra* ceremony was held some 30 years ago in Selegn village, Shiir section.

Although any Dassanech could participate in the *arra* inauguration ceremony, the rights to make decisions are reserved to certain members of the senior generation-set known for their wisdom, fairness, and rich life experiences. There exists a hierarchy of power structure within

the *arra* institution. The top and ultimate decision makers are called the *challeba* (with their leader known as *arraba*), to whom cases are presented in the *nab*, a secluded open space for deliberation on important internal matters.¹⁵ The number of *challeba* presiding in any particular *nab* would be four or five, and communities living in close proximity would have one *nab*. The second important position is known as *nemo*, which is constituted by influential and knowledgeable elders responsible for advising the *challeba* and ensuring the execution of final decisions by giving instructions to the *tolol*, the third position in the hierarchy. The *tolol* are like foot-soldiers, who are responsible for the actual implementation of decisions by the senior *arra*. If the use of force is needed, the *tolol* may recruit additional force from the *gus* – the youngest and most energetic *arra* members. The *challeba*, the *nemo*, and the *tolol* are allowed to enter the *nab* (with the *challeba* sitting in the center, the *nemo* behind them, and the *tolol* behind the *nemo*), while the other members of the society attend deliberations as they sit outside of the secluded area. Individuals in junior positions gradually get promoted to the immediately higher power structure, although this does not preclude merit-based accelerated promotion.

4.3 Conflict management: Levels and participants

The identity and participation of players in conflict management vary depending on the type of conflict and level of its management. Almost all intra-ethnic conflicts are managed within the community at different levels: family, age-group, neighborhood, and *arra*. Conflicts between married couples, co-wives, siblings, and other family members may be resolved through the intervention of or initiative taken by any influential member of the household (usually, the head of the household). Serious family problems may be taken to the neighborhood elders or even to the *arra* if deemed necessary. Disputes between neighbors and peer groups are taken to the *arra* only when they are too difficult or complicated to address at lower levels. At the lower level of conflict management, there exists no structure or procedure to follow. Any person with modest reconciliation skills is trusted to arbitrate between disputing parties. However, matters brought to the attention of the *arra* are expected to follow certain procedures, such as ritualized gift giving by the accuser, presentation of claims and counter-claims, verification of evidence, the hearing of testimony, etc.

¹⁵ Not all people, and no women, are allowed to enter the *nab*. Therefore, common public meetings (e.g., those organized by the government officials) are held under the shade of a tree.

Inter-ethnic conflicts are managed at two or three levels depending on whether the conflict is domestic or cross-border. These include community-based reconciliation, *woreda*-based peace initiatives, and bilateral border commission meetings. The community-based approach represents the customary dispute resolution mechanisms where peace initiatives are taken by sending peace messengers to another ethnic group within Ethiopia or across the border in Kenya. When the other party agrees to resolve the conflict peacefully, internal meetings are organized to discuss reconciliation. Delegates (senior, wise, experienced, and articulate elders) are identified to attend the peace negotiations. During the selection of delegates, attempts are made to ensure the representation of the senior generation-set (represented by members of the *arra*), members of territorial section parties of the conflict, and members of certain clans. Other active players in conflict (e.g., youth and women) do not take part in the resolution largely because the culture of Dessanech does not provide for active participation of women and children in major public matters. Young men may accompany the peace delegates largely to provide protection to the elders rather than to air the voices of the youth. Women may watch the proceeding and prepare food and drinks for the participants. However, there is no forum for them to present their views.

The *woreda*-based peace initiative relates to official peace activities (e.g., meetings, accords, and festivals) organized by authorities of adjacent border districts on their own or in collaboration with other agencies working on peace (e.g., CEWARN and NGOs). After a major conflict incidence or series of small conflicts, one district official may reach out to one or more neighboring districts in Ethiopia and/or Kenya with a proposal for a peace meeting. When the proposal is accepted, the date and venue are fixed in consultation. During such meetings, the Dessanech are represented by *woreda* officials, representatives of elders, and in some cases by representatives of NGOs. In most cases, the representatives of elders are randomly chosen by *woreda* officials or partner NGOs rather than by the community. Hence, the representation of senior generation-sets, territorial sections, and relevant clans are rarely ensured. Sometimes the delegates from the *woreda* administration and the partner NGOs are reported to put pressure on the elders to accept terms of agreement that they would otherwise reject. The flaw in the selection of elders and the pressure to make them accept peace deals significantly reduce their credibility, which in turn reduces public recognition and respect for the reconciliation.

Bilateral border commission meetings represent the third peace-making approach. When the local peace initiatives fail and conflicts escalate unabated, the Governments of Ethiopia and Kenya organize high-level meetings through their border commissions. The latest such meeting was held in late May 2011 in Kenya following the 4 May 2011 incident in which 22 Turkana and three Dessanech were killed. Two years ago, similar bilateral meetings were held in October 2009 at Nakuru (Kenya) and November 2009 at Hawassa (Ethiopia). The border commission's bilateral meetings are attended by government officials of the two countries. Although the *woreda* and zonal administrators attend such meetings as part of the Ethiopian delegates, decisions were often made by the representatives of the adjacent regional governments, sometimes through imposition and against the arguments of the *woreda* officials. Except in follow-up meetings (often designed to ensure the implementation of earlier bilateral decisions), representatives of

the local community rarely participate in border commission meetings and decisions. Since the two governments seem to be more interested in stabilizing the existing peaceful relationship, national interests have been overshadowing local concerns.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined pastoral conflicts in Dassanech area, Southern Ethiopia, against the background of environmental change and food insecurity. The study points to the presence of an association between environmental stress and the escalation of inter-ethnic pastoral conflicts in the area. The Dassanech and their neighbors have been demographically expanding. Population growth and the high social values attached to livestock contributed to a steady increase in the number of animals. Human and animal population expansion occurred in a fragile environment frequently hit by drought that diminished the carrying capacity of the area. The pressure on the scarce and fast-depleting pasture and water resources undoubtedly escalated competition and the subsequent resource-related conflicts. Nevertheless, the complexity of pastoral conflicts in Dassanech poses tremendous challenge in establishing direct causal links between concrete environmental factors and specific conflict incidents. Socio-cultural and economic factors cause or trigger conflicts independently or in conjunction with the natural processes. For example, theft of livestock and individualized killings for fame and to acquire guns flame inter-ethnic tension. The involvement of elements of security forces in the cross-border attacks and the failure to respect previous peace accords agitate people to opt for retribution. Finally, the recent introduction of automatic rifles and liquors contribute to the occurrence of deadly conflicts.

Apart from actions that trigger reactions, government inactions allowed conflicts to occur and escalate. These include lax security in the border areas to take preventive actions; lack of institutional mechanisms to enforce peace accords; lack of common development projects to create socio-economic integration of the conflicting groups; absence of livelihood strategies to counter the negative effects of climate change; and lack of comprehensive peace plans. Neither the traditional dispute resolution approaches nor the official peace initiatives organized by government institutions seem to bring an end to such conflicts. Even worse, resource-based deadly intra-ethnic conflict began to occur for the first time in Dassanech. This warrants the need to identify the factors that cause, trigger, or exacerbate conflict and devise a comprehensive strategy in which peace agreements should be followed by border area development interventions (e.g., pasture, irrigation, water points, schools, healthcare, veterinary facilities, extension services, etc.) to promote mutual cooperation.

Regarding development, some major projects are already underway in the Omo River basin: hydroelectric dams, sugarcane plantation, sugar factories, and oil exploration. From the perspective of some Dassanech, some of the major development projects being implemented (especially the dams and irrigation schemes) are viewed as threats rather than opportunities sim-

ply because these projects will drain their lifeline – floods. Given the lack of experience of the Dessanech people in working on plantations and in factories as daily laborers, one would expect the sugar project to cause influx of highland migrants, who will possibly overwhelm the locals and seize economic opportunities and social space.

On the other hand, painting a gloomy picture of future development projects in the area without concrete evidence is tantamount to deconstructive denial prospects. The new large-scale development initiatives in South Omo Zone may significantly contribute to the development of the area thereby marking an end to all social evils – that is, conflict, poverty, disease, and underdevelopment. This would in fact depend on proper understanding of the existing social structures and people's life choices. The Dessanech people have social structures, values, and belief systems that govern their interactions, reassure their integrity and cohesion, and provide meaning to and control over their lives. Such issues matter to the people no less than material betterment. Hence, in order to ensure greater control and choice for the people and avoid unwarranted disruptions in their lives and livelihoods, it is crucial to undertake needs and environmental assessments through baseline study before the implementation of any development project in the area.

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Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

Date	Location	Interview/Focus Group Discussion With
02 June 2011	Jinka	Official, Representative of Zonal Administration
05 June 2011	Jinka	Official, Representative of the Office of Agriculture
06 June 2011	Jinka	Expert, Livestock Unit, the Office of Agriculture
08 June 2011	Jinka	Expert, Crop Production Unit, the Office of Agri
09 June 2011	Jinka	Expert, Safety-net and Food Security Unit
10 July 2011	Omorate	a pastoral, a former member of the Parliament
10 July 2011	Omorate	a pastoral by from Hadho
11 July 2011	Omorate	Official, Representative of Dassanech Woreda
11 July 2011	Omorate	Official, Representative of the Office of Agriculture
12 July 2011	Omorate	2 Expert, Safety-net and Emergency Aid, Unit
12 July 2011	Omorate	a pastoral, a former member of the Parliament
13 July 2011	Rate	2 elderly pastorals, members of senior generation-set
13 July 2011	Rate	2 pastoral women
14 July 2011	Rate	FGD with elderly men, women, and youth
15 July 2011	Omorate	Official, Representative of Women's Affairs
15 July 2011	Omorate	a pastoral woman from Koro
15 July 2011	Omorate	Expert, Crop Production Unit
16 July 2011	Koro	FGD with elderly men including senior generation-set
16 July 2011	Koro	FGD with adult women
17 July 2011	Koro	FGD with youth
17 July 2011	Koro	a youth herder
18 July 2011	Koro	a young pastoral woman
18 July 2011	Koro	an elderly man
19 July 2011	Hadho	FGD with elderly men and boys
19 July 2011	Hadho	an elderly man, member of the senior generation-set
19 July 2011	Hadho	two pastoral school boys
20 July 2011	Omorate	Expert, Water Development Unit
20 July 2011	Omorate	Expert, Crop Production Unit
21 July 2011	Omorate	Official, Representative of Dassanech Woreda
23 July 2011	Addis Ababa	Official, Representative of the SNNPR

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Peace and Conflict Studies Research Reports

The Research Reports serve to disseminate the results of on-going work at the Research Unit Peace and Conflict Studies, Otto Suhr Institute of Political Science at Freie Universität Berlin. Our research incorporates epistemological aspects of knowledge production in peace and conflict research as well as comparative empirical studies of violent conflict within and between societies.
