

## Of grasslands and guns: natural-resource based conflict among the Waso Borana pastoralists of northern Kenya

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**Introduction** The once productive, arid rangelands of northern Kenya, traditionally dominated by a mix of woody species (*Acacia*, *Commiphora*, *Cordia* spp.) and graminoids (*Tetrapogon*, *Aristida*, *Chrysopogon* and *Sporobolus* spp.) have gradually deteriorated in ecological condition over recent decades (Herlocker, 1999). A major factor considered to be responsible for this trend is the disintegration of traditional systems of land stewardship. Traditional authority has waned in northern Kenya and has often been replaced by open-access tenure, overseen by ineffectual government administrators. Couple this with frequent droughts that typify this zone, as well as expanding populations of people and livestock, and the net result is increased competition for diminishing quantity and quality of grazing and water resources. Local people throughout northern Kenya have reportedly entered a survival mode of existence where the incidence of armed conflict has increased because resource-based disputes have intensified (Smith *et al.*, 2000). The objective of this research was to investigate and quantify the views of the Waso Boran people, one of many ethnic groups in the northern Kenyan rangelands, concerning the causes, and possible solutions, for their conflicts that revolve around natural resources.

**Materials and methods** Social survey research, founded on structured questionnaires, was conducted during two years to quantify attitudes and opinions of 540 household heads from among the Waso Boran community concerning natural-resource based conflict.

**Results** Survey respondents most commonly mentioned the following factors as the greatest contributors to resource-use problems in their area: (1) influx of modern weapons (noted by 96% of respondents); (2) shortage of water (74%); (3) wildlife predation on livestock (70%); and (4) shortage of grazing (66%). Accordingly, most respondents (94%) felt that curbing the flow of weapons could reduce conflict. Another 93% felt that efforts to rehabilitate traditional systems of resource tenure would help the situation. A reduction in conflict could allow use of what are now “no-man’s lands” and allow implementation of technical improvements to grazing capacity and water resources. Survey respondents felt that other outcomes from conflict include: (1) a gradual aggregation of people towards urban centres (93% of respondents) as well as complete land alienation (46%). These factors in turn have contributed to changes in the diet of pastoral people (from livestock to more grain-based foods) and have exacerbated the incidence of human and livestock diseases as settlements have become more concentrated. Mixed effects of conflict on food security have been noted, with some people having increased access to grain-based diets as they migrate closer to urban centres. Conflict is also believed to hinder livestock marketing by 44% of respondents. Conflict reportedly reduces the mobility of pastoralists and so they are less able to cope with drought shocks (83% of respondents) or routinely access water points and forage reserves (79 to 82%).

**Conclusions** Fear of violent conflict is reportedly pervasive in the Waso Borana region of northern Kenya. Although increased populations of people and livestock are likely to be the root causes of these problems, the respondents tended to identify symptoms that revolve around enhanced competition for natural resources. There has been a systemic failure of government to provide a secure environment for pastoral production systems. Until commitment is made by government to reduce conflict and begin to restore the confidence of local people in resource access and governance, technical intervention to enhance forage or water supplies will be irrelevant. Relief, rather than development, will also continue to dominate the social agenda. First and foremost, control of weapons proliferation appears paramount. Associated efforts by government policy makers to protect rights of local people to land are also vital. Some of the problem has international roots, however. Unrest within neighbouring countries such as Ethiopia and Somalia occasionally spills over into northern Kenya, and arms may originate from these sources. International coordination is therefore required in any long-term, viable solution.

### References

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