CONFLICT ANALYSIS ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN MARSABIT COUNTY

BACKGROUND

Marsabit County is the second largest county after Turkana County and covers an area of 70,691.2 km2. It shares a porous border with Ethiopia and Somalia, making it a corridor for flow of illegal immigrants, illicit arms, and contraband including drugs from neighbouring conflict areas. Historically, conflict drivers in the county were confined to contest on pasture and water but this has since evolved as discussed in this brief, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first case of COVID-19 was reported in Marsabit County on 7 June 2020. [1] Since then, the number of people infected by the disease in the county had risen to 17 as at 18 August 2020. Though the rate of infection in the county is currently low[2], there exists increased levels of mistrust and stigma towards people from perceived hotspot areas such as Nairobi and Mandera counties.

The residents have also raised concerns over inadequate assistance especially in providing food and non-food items for the most vulnerable community members and purchase of PPEs for health workers.[3] Despite the existence of the pandemic and reduced physical interactions due to COVID-19 restrictions, the county has experienced recurrent violent conflicts particularly between the Gabra and Borana communities though there have also been conflicts between Gabra-Desanach, Gabra-Rendille, Rendille-Borana and Borana-Garri. The ongoing conflicts are arguably opportunistic having taken advantage of the security agencies concentration on enforcement of the COVID-19 containment and preventive measures.

Notwithstanding the ongoing efforts to combat spread of the pandemic, its impact on underlying conflicts remains a concern for the REINVENT programme and stakeholders. Emerging political alignments around the 2022 general elections and potential alliances place pressure on a context that is already fragile from longstanding ethnic tensions by perceived skewed intra-county distribution and access of devolved resources. Food and pasture scarcity due to prolonged droughts and adverse climatic conditions further complicate the peace, security and health situation. A combination of droughts, floods, high temperatures and erratic rainfall have challenged productivity and distribution of food, nutrition and incomes. Since pasture and water availability is largely determined by the distribution and incidences of rainfall, less predictable and decreasing rainfall due to climatic change and combined with rising evapo-transpiration rates, mean that supply of these resources may decrease thus increasing resource competition, community cohesion and peace.

REINVENT considers the pandemic control and mitigation efforts as opportune for the mainstreaming of peace and cohesion into all sectors of governance and development in Marsabit County. This brief has therefore been developed as a result of consultations with various stakeholders including civil society actors working on peace and security in Marsabit County. The purpose of the brief is to better understand the conflict dynamics, highlight opportunities for response and investment in peace and to share experiences from the various stakeholders involved in peace and security. The brief is targeted at peace and security actors both state and non-state and offers recommendations towards improving peace and security programming.

(Photo/Istock)

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[1] The total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases as at 5 September 2020 is 24.

[2] During consultations, it was realised that participants held the perception that the low rate of infections in the county could be attributed to unwillingness of the people to be tested and to the vastness of the county where it may not be possible to reach all those targeted for testing.

[3] In April 2020, according to the Quarterly County budget implementation report, the County Government allocated KES 240 million towards purchase PFEs, medicines and relief food to cushion residents from the effects of COVID-19.

IMPACT ON PEACE AND SECURITY

Torched Motorbikes during in Marsabit during a past conflict. (Photo/courtesy)

The spread of the pandemic has amplified the fragility of communities in Marsabit and increased their vulnerability to conflicts both existing and new. These conflicts are viewed as opportunistic, having taken advantage of the spread of the pandemic and the fact that security agencies have prioritised enforcement of the preventive measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 in the county. Various restrictions introduced that include screening at all entry points, a dawn to dusk curfew, social distancing, among others have influenced the peace and security context to some extent. The COVID-19 pandemic is occurring against the backdrop of humanitarian challenges resulting from drought, floods and desert locust upsurge. Responses to humanitarian and conflict challenges have been hampered by movement restrictions, as well as health restrictions, imposed by the government to contain the spread of COVID-19. This has led to increased reliance on community structures to mitigate against spread of violent conflicts ad to reach affected communities. Specific issues are enumerated below:

Land and boundary conflicts:
Boundary disputes between communities have increased across the county as various communities lay claim to certain geographical regions driven by the need to control available resources. The main conflicts are between North-Horr and Saku sub-counties in Marsabit and between Marsabit and neighboring counties, specifically Wajir. The contestation has pitted the Borana community against the Gabra community.[4] The land and boundary disputes are made worse by the fact that there are no clear land boundaries between the Borana and Gabra communities; they coexisted in the same settlements and share the same grazing lands. However, as political divisions intensify between the two, territorial boundaries are being recognised, contested, and negotiated. Unfortunately, disputes between individuals quickly escalate into full blown ethnic conflicts, sustained by a cycle of revenge.[5] In addition, there have been a number of cases reported that have been linked to tensions related to access to pasture and water.[6] Between May 2020 and June 2020, 12 people lost their lives in different incidences in Saku sub-county over boundary contestation.[7] The boundary disputes are likely to escalate if the process of demarcation of boundaries by the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) ahead of the 2022 general elections proceeds without proper public education and conflict sensitivity..

Increased competition for political offices:
Devolution has occasioned several conflict dynamics, a major one being increased competition for political offices. During the 2013 and 2017 elections, communities within the county formed political alliances to negotiate access to power and resources in the county. Demographically small groups such

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[4] The Borana community argue that Turbi and Forole towns are part of Moyale sub-county. The government had administratively delineated the two towns to be part of North Horr constituency before implementation of devolution. other locations contested by Gabra and Borana communities are Shuur and Horondeer which Borana community claim are in North Horr while Gabra community state it is within Moyale Constituency.

[5] The conflict in June 2020 was sparked by the killing of a Gabra elder allegedly by a Borana in Girisa, Saku constituency. The incident happened following a dispute at Girisa dam where livestock come to water, about six kilometers outside Marsabit town. The conflict was exacerbated by the long prevailing boundary dispute between Saku and North Horr sub counties over Horronderr area which Is claimed by both the Borana and Gabra communities. The incident thus rekindled tribal clashes between the two communities.

[6] In June 2020, three people were killed in Badan Rero, Moyale sub-county, the border between Marsabit and Wajir counties. A peace meeting scheduled to take place soon after was called off after another person was killed in the same areas on the day the meeting was to take place. In Badasa, Saku sub-county, four people were killed in an ambush by heavily armed attackers at dusk.

[7] Peace and security updates from the REINVENT team based in Upper Eastern region.

Men in marsabit at a past meeting. (Photo/courtesy)

as the Gabra, Rendille and Burji communities united with the aim of challenging perceived dominance of the Borana community in the county's leadership. The contestation has led to intolerance and polarisation along ethnic lines. Communities concerned hold the perception that resources at the county including employment opportunities are shared according to ethno-political affiliations, which perpetuates a sense of marginalisation among minority communities. Political incitement to violence continues to fuel local inter-group conflicts and election-related hostilities particularly in Saku and Moyale Constituencies. Polarisation along ethnic lines perpetuate conflict and hinder peacebuilding interventions. Local leaders blame security officers, and local administration for either being reluctant to act or biased.

Prior and during 2017 elections, political and ethnic intolerance was high in most parts of Marsabit owing to the ethno-political alliances. The experience from 2017 was somewhat different from 2013 elections as in 2013, alliances were clan-based while in 2017, the support base for the candidates came from across the ethnic communities. The reason for this difference is that in 2013, the Rendille, Borana, Gabra, Garri and Burji (REGABU) alliance managed to field a candidate who defeated the candidate from the Borana community. However, in 2017, though alliances were formed, they were not ethnic specific in nature as each community was represented in both alliances. Though both situations served to respond to the goals of the groups that fronted

them, they were not ideal for promoting cohesion amongst the communities involved. The alliance formed in 2017, though split the communities in half depending on where allegiance fell, also served to reinforce division due to the existence of fault lines that were present in the previous from the elections held in 2013.

Cattle rustling:

This is a recurrent form of conflict experienced in Marsabit and neighbouring counties during the rainy season as the pastoralists endeavor to restock their herds that they lost during the dry season. During this time, the movement of people and animals also increases. In addition, and in many instances, young men, the morans who have gone through their rite of passage, steal livestock as part of their compliance with cultural ceremonies and rituals. The opening up of the Northern corridor has expanded the road network easing movements in and out and this has led to commercialisation of the cultural cattle rustling hence a big motivation to people who benefit from the practice. The economic drivers of cattle raiding are however increasingly taking centre stage due to a more commercialised phenomenon. The rustlings are increasingly carried out by young men who are funded and directed by outside actors, and often without sanction of community elders.

It had been assumed that the introduction of directives such as enforced curfew to manage the spread of COVID-19

would bring down the number of raids in the county and by extension, the region. However, reports shared stated that the curfew period was only upheld in Marsabit town and Moyale town, which are peri urban. Majority of the residents in the county are pastoralists and live outside these towns, in rural area where enforcement of directives, such as the curfew period is difficult. These pastoralist communities were mostly on the move in search of water and pasture for their animals as this period coincided with the locust invasion, which had debilitating results on the already scarce vegetation in the county, hence necessitating increased movement of the communities.

Stigma and mistrust among the communities:

There is an increase in new forms of division – between generations, among urban and rural populations, and an increase in mistrust of "outsiders". People from areas considered COVID-19 hot spots are faced with stigma. Those from towns such as Nairobi and Nanyuki are suspected of being infected with COVID-19 and are profiled and ostracised upon arrival in Marsabit. People from Moyale town are also treated with suspicious because despite the lockdown of neighbouring Mandera County, there has been regular movement across the boundary into and out of Mandera and into Ethiopia. In Odda area of Moyale town, residents raised alarm over an increase of people from Mandera and Ethiopia who were feared to have increased the risk of contracting COVID-19 and were also proving to be a security threat with

security forces from the Kenya defense forces (KDF) along the border responding by repulsing people sighted in the area.

Gender-based violence:

SGBV cases that include child marriages, FGM and domestic violence, have been on the increase during this period. However, remain largely unreported. This has been attributed to the patriarchal nature of the communities linked to the inherent cultural beliefs that serve to curtail dispensation of justice for SGBV survivors.[8] Girls especially continue to face increased threat of violence and abuse, with teenage pregnancies on the increase due to prolonged closure of schools. Additionally, women are not prioritised as stakeholders in resolution of the ongoing conflicts in the county, though they are most vulnerable.

Food insecurity:

This continues to impact communities in Marsabit following restrictions around COVID-19 prevention resulting in increased vulnerability. The county was already food insecure prior to COVID-19[9] and the situation is dire as situation reports state that a second generation of immature swarms of desert locusts started to form in north-west Kenya in June 2020.[10] These swarms threaten the remaining crops and pastures in Marsabit county and this likely to be a source of conflict as communities struggle to control the scarce resource amidst restrictions posed by COVID-19 prevention measures..

[8] According to NPS recorded cases for Marsabit County, 23 SGBV cases were reported for the period between January 2020 and August 2020. It was revealed that SGBV information is not freely shared and reported by the survivors due to fear of stigmatization from the community.
[9] According to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analysis prior to COVID-19, about 980,000 people are facing severe food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above), with 112,500 people in the counties of Kwale, Turkana and Marsabit estimated to be in Emergency (IPC Phase 4).
[10] https://reliefweb.int/report/kenya/kenya-situation-report-17-june-2020

PEACE-BUILDING RESPONSE MECHANISMS IN THE WAKE OF THE PANDEMIC

(Photo/courtesy)

As has been the case in all the counties, Marsabit county established a County Emergency Preparedness and Response Team comprising of the County Health Management Teams and the Office of the County Commissioner. The team has established response protocols and has been engaged in sensitisation activities across the county through talk shows on FM stations and through public announcements. The County Emergency Preparedness and Response Team has 15 members, 5 of whom are women who have been very active in highlighted the different challenges that women and children are facing in the wake of the pandemic and advising on interventions that are gender responsive.

Due to the limited number of cases in the county, peacebuilding initiatives have been undertaken in the same way as was done prior to the outbreak of the pandemic with the only exception being that government directives are taken into consideration to limit further spread of COVID-19. Most of the peace initiatives have been geared towards responding to the outbreak of violence in the county. However, as physical interactions reduce due to COVID-19 restrictions, social media has become an important avenue for social and political discourse. Citizens are using social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups to comment on the national and County governments response to the pandemic and its impacts on the economy. Unfortunately, over the months of May, June and July 2020, there has been an increase in inciteful messages particularly on social media and WhatsApp

platforms. The inciteful messages have served to promote inter-ethnic intolerance resulted in increased tensions within an already volatile context.[11] According to observation from the REINVENT programme and partners in the county, social media is increasingly being misused, increasing inter-ethnic intolerance and conflict.

In order to respond to emerging and ongoing conflicts, actors from the peace and security sectors have been engaged in various ways in prevention and management:

Community peace and reconciliation:
Efforts have been undertaken especially in the wake of the ongoing conflicts. Community structures such as the elders' councils have been engaged to broker peace between the conflicting communities as they identify lasting solutions to conflicts in the county. There is an increased realisation that galvanising community level peace infrastructure to respond to conflict threats especially through ADR, has helped mitigate conflicts from developing into violence. SND, a civil society organisation, has for instance been engaged in community peace processes in Badan Rero between the Borana and Degodia communities and in Saku between the Gabra and Borana communities. In addition, the County Commissioner recommended the reactivation of all peace committees in the county. He directed all DCCs be engaged in peace initiatives of the four sub-county peace committees in North Horr, Moyale, Laisamis and Saku. This recognition of community peace

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[11] In June 2020 County Commissioner issued a warning directed at users of online platforms including bloggers, against inciting the public. One blogger was arrested and required to record a statement at Saku Police station before he was released.

[12] At the time of production of this Brief, this process was still ongoing with plans in place to engage Ward level community peace structures.

structures by the national and county governments, besides engagement in their reconstitution and capacity building is important for the consolidation of the peace agenda in Marsabit. Resourcing peace structures though the county budgets will importantly sustain peacebuilding efforts.

Mitigating incitement through social media:
The youth have particularly resorted to online discussions around political discourse at the county level with online opinion polls created regarding the gubernatorial position. Whilst the online platforms have increased access to communities, addressing their harmful impact especially in escalating ethnic and political rivalry is important in restoring cohesion.

Joint peace interventions through the county leadership, security agents and community elders:
Community and political leaders and have been useful in brokering ceasefire and subsequent peace agreements. In May 2020, Rendille/Samburu Morans attacked Borana villages in Saku constituency in Tari Adhi village Badasa location. Twenty (20) people were killed and 300 animals were stolen. The stolen livestock was recovered following the intervention of security agencies and community elders. Likewise, the county leadership of Wajir and Mandera were involved in managing the conflict between the Borana and Degodia communities in Marsabit and Wajir counties respectively. Following a conflict between the two communities over an

alleged theft of 250 camels, a peace meeting was held that culminated in the Governors of Wajir and Marsabit counties signing a peace accord in Badan Rero at the border of Wajir and Marsabit counties on 13 June 2020. Meetings have also been convened through the Drylands Learning and Capacity Building Initiative (DLCI) and partners such as the NCIC that has brought together the political leadership, local government officials, civil society groups and communities to discuss and agree in various strategies to bring about security, cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

Response to conflicts and sexual and gender-based violence: Various engagements have been undertaken in prevention and management of SGBV especially in the wake of COVID-19. These initiatives are however challenged by the directives still in operation though these have eased between August 2020 and September 2020. In June 2020, the Magistrate's court in Marsabit held an open forum to raise awareness on SGBV reporting. This was also because the residents preferred to settle SGBV through community ADR as opposed to reporting the cases to the police. While, the Judiciary has made strides in disseminating information, SGBV continues unabated in the county. CSOs have also been engaged in different ways in working towards prevention and management of SGBV cases. SND, for instance, worked with the police station in Moyale sub-county to refurbish the gender helped desk to make it more accessible and approachable to residents who wish to report SGBV cases.

GAPS IN RESPONSE

(Photo/courtesy)

The responses undertaken so far have been useful in managing the incidences of conflict and insecurity, but some challenges still exist. Conflicts are still on the rise as the root causes are not adequately dealt with. Due to the minimal number of reported COVID-19 cases in Marsabit County, the impact on peace and security is not yet clear though the County government has put in place mechanisms to manage the spread. The pandemic is however presenting an opportunity for conflict as authorities turn their attention towards its management at the expense of dealing with the rise in tensions thus undermining peacebuilding efforts. As has been the case in other contexts, a delay in implementation of timely interventions could result in the evolution of the conflicts especially as the country enters the election period.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are several recommendations that can be considered for action based on the contextual issues that have arisen:

- **Ensure that there are sustained efforts towards reconciliation and cohesion:** This is possible through actors (both state and non-state) engagements in addressing the impact of the conflict and the causes of the conflicts. This also requires long-term strategies and consistent engagement with communities and other stakeholders including political leaders and government. It also includes considering responses that are still relevant and those that need to be changed based on the dynamism of the context and whether the responses and approaches can help build resilience to violence post COVID-19.

- **Enlisting the support of local actors, particularly networks of women peacebuilders and youth, is key to sustainable peace processes:** Women and youth are embedded in the community and can implement initiatives to prevent and resolve tensions. They are the first points of access for communities especially in the areas where conflicts are being experienced and have a good understanding of the issues and the context of the conflicts. They therefore hold the key to identifying workable solutions that can be used in a sustainable manner. By strengthening their role and capacities they can respond to the increase of sexual and gender-based violence, alongside other issues.

- **Messaging against divisive narratives:** Peace actors need to mobilise to counter narratives against those belonging to marginalised groups (either marginalised by virtue of perceived exposure to COVID-19 or by virtue of perceived political leaning). Through analysis, peace actors could identify those belonging to these marginalised groups and support them to document their own stories. Peace actors could also engage directly with those involved in spreading divisive messages and those covering the stories to ensure that they are not unwittingly fueling violence.

- **Support coordination, cooperation and learning across sectors:** Peacebuilding, health and socio-economic sectors should work together to respond to public health crisis issues that arise in the context of conflicts to identify and agree on initiatives that promote durable solutions. The County Emergency and Preparedness Response Team should integrate peacebuilding into planning and execution of activities. Contextual analysis should be included in the operations of the Team to reduce the risk of increasing tensions and triggering new conflicts. This includes ensuring that conflict sensitivity is applied systematically in all COVID-19 responses with health, humanitarian and human security sectors. Local actors can also be mobilised to contribute to curbing the spread of the pandemic using their existing networks and knowledge of community relations to coordinate preventive response.

- **Engagement on security should be community-centered, accountable and more responsive:** Ineffective state security provision was highlighted as a major factor contributing to conflict, with the likelihood that climate change will lead to increased insecurity as communities try to adapt. The government should employ broad-based measures to strengthen security provision in the county while ensuring that it is responsive, accountable and based on strong community-police engagement, taking into consideration community needs.