RAPID CONFLICT ANALYSIS IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 TURKANA AND POKOT COUNTIES

BACKGROUND

Turkana County is situated in north western Kenya and borders West Pokot County to the south. Both counties border Uganda to the west while Turkana borders South Sudan to the north and Ethiopia to the north east. West Pokot borders Baringo County to the east, Elgeyo Marakwet to the south east and Trans Nzoia County to the south. Conflicts between Turkana and West Pokot are mainly experienced along the shared border areas of Lokiriama, Nauyapong, Alale, Turkwel, Kainuk and other surrounding areas also known as the conflict corridor. Turkana and West Pokot counties account for more than 60 per cent of cases of livestock theft, including cattle rustling, experienced in Kenya. The high incidence of crime is due to a number of factors including public acceptance of cattle raiding as cultural practice, small arms proliferation, erosion of authority of traditional leaders and dispute resolution mechanisms, and disputes over access to dry season grazing sites. The recurrent raids and retaliatory attacks in Turkana and West Pokot draw in the neighbouring counties, notably Baringo, Samburu and Laikipia, as well as cross-border communities in Uganda, South Sudan and Ethiopia.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread across the country, the two counties have formed Emergency Rapid Response Committees, which are co–chaired by the Governor and the County Commissioner to oversee implementation of the National Government's directives. Some measures put in place to contain the pandemic, including restriction of movement, closure of hotels, and markets, have negatively affected the pastoral livelihoods in the two counties. Pastoralists, who depend on animals for their livelihoods, are often among the most vulnerable populations and are facing new challenges due to restriction on moving their animals in search of water and pasture, and reduced ability to sell meat, milk and other animal products that they depend on. The restrictions notwithstanding, participants who contributed to this rapid analysis reported violent conflicts and inter-communal tensions along the Turkana-West Pokot border.

REINVENT programme compiled this brief after consultations with various stakeholders working on peace and security in Turkana and West Pokot Counties in the wake of the pandemic. The purpose is to increase the programme's understanding of the driving forces of the conflicts including the changing dynamics and how these have impacted the context in the counties concerned. The brief highlights opportunities for response and investment in peace in the region and is targeted at peace and security actors both state and non-state at the national, regional (regional blocs) and county levels.

A village in Turkana. (Photo/Istock)

[1] National Crime Research Centre, Turkana County Crime Outlook 2018; West Pokot Crime Outlook 2018
[2] Turkana County allocated an initial KES 479.8M through a supplementary budget in April 2020. On the other hand, West Pokot County set aside funds but the funds are yet to be approved through the County Assembly.

DRIVERS OF CONFLICT AND PEACE IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Guns remain within Karamoja and are prevelent across its borders with Turkana and Toposaland (Khristopher Carlson/IRIN)

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the conflict and peace context across the country in different ways. It is viewed as a potential threat multiplier that can amplify existing conflict drivers, as well as an accelerant of existing conflict. Conflict can exacerbate disease transmission and hinder public health response. Fewer cases of infected persons have been recorded in the counties of Turkana and West Pokot[3], as compared to the rest of the country and conflicts continue to be reported particularly along the conflict corridor. The main conflict drivers are highlighted hereunder:
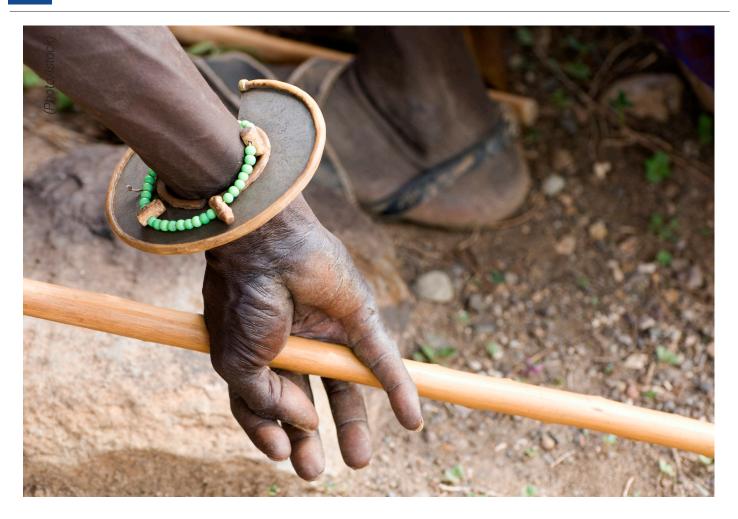
Security and community relations:
Security agents' focus on the implementation of government guidelines on curfew has left some sensitive border areas like the Pokot-Turkana border, Uganda-Kenya and South Sudan borders unmanned hence culprits are taking advantage to advance their cattle theft agenda, for instance, in June 2020, two raids have been reported in Turkana East where one-person lost his life while the others sustained bullet wounds. The mutual trust and cooperation built between communities and security apparatus have been compromised during this period of COVID-19. Police brutality plus lack of proper sensitisation of the community especially in the rural areas during the implementation of presidential directives is contributing to conflict. The shoot to kill order by the Regional Commissioner has further increased tensions between the community and security providers thus complicating their already fragile relationship.

Pastoralists in the region have tended to disregard restrictions on movement, arguing that they must take the animals out to graze, or to areas with adequate pasture. The movement of animals outside curfew hours has put the herders in conflict with security agencies enforcing the lockdown. Restriction of movement is likely to escalate the competition and depletion of available pasture and water, leading to conflict. Similarly, small businesses such as those run by boda boda (motorcycle) riders, have also come into conflict with security officers for disregarding the movement restrictions particularly in urban areas.

Criminal activities:
Though cases of theft and burglary were reported to be minimal, they are having a big impact on businesses. Business owners in Lodwar and Lokichar in Turkana County were concerned after their shops were broken into during the curfew hours. It was feared that these cases are likely to increase if security agencies do not act to repel the culprits. It was also reported that there is a new trend in livestock theft whereby it is alleged that Pokot community traders buy stolen animals from Turkana community rustlers – Lowadaka[4] – and sell them in Uganda. The animals are driven across the border to Loroo and Moroto districts in Uganda and unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 restrictions in Kenya and Uganda, tracking and recovery of the stolen livestock is particularly problematic. It is feared that if the

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[3] As at 5 October 2020, a total of 237 cases were reported from West Pokot and Turkana counties with majority (216 cases) recorded in Turkana County
[4] Lowadaka- is a term used to refer to petty livestock thieves who steal not more than ten animals. These are different from raiders because they simply steal and do not use force or violence. Mostly they steal while animals are out grazing in the fields.

(Photo/Istock)

trend continues, it will heighten conflict along the corridor as Turkana residents blame Pokot traders for encouraging the Lowadaka to steal from them. In addition, criminal activities along the internal and external borders are taking place.[5]

Inter-community conflict:

The conflict in Tiaty (East Pokot sub-county) and Turkana South sub-county is also posing a great challenge to the peace and security of West Pokot and Turkana Counties. The conflict has been longstanding and has recently been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic to the extent that priority has been give to enforcement of the government directives to manage and prevent the spread of the pandemic. The result is some areas considered conflict 'hot spots' have been left without adequate security surveillance, allowing conflicts to continue unabated. The youth from Pokot and Turkana communities are alleged to be regrouping and recruiting their counterparts from other areas including those considered to be currently peaceful, e.g. Loima sub-county (Turkana) and Pokot South sub-county (West Pokot) to take part in conflict within the volatile areas. This trend is worrying as the conflict in Tiaty could spill over to other areas that have been considered peaceful in the recent past.

Conflict insensitive interventions:

The county governments of West Pokot and Turkana counties allocated funds to purchase relief food to help cushion communities against the adverse effects of COVID-19. These efforts were in addition to those by various humanitarian organisations working in the region.[6] The distribution of relief food through various actors and agencies is however alleged to be concentrated in the urban centers leaving the rural communities unattended and this may spark conflict between rural communities and their leaders whom they feel have not properly communicated the needs of the communities. Real or perceived shortages of basic needs, and the disruption of normal functions and routines caused by the measures taken to contain COVID-19, coupled with poverty, unemployment and inequality across north western region could also contribute to the factors supporting increase in crime and criminal activities.

Participants interviewed further stated that registration of persons to benefit from government COVID-19 response subsidies was not clearly explained and allegedly not done transparently. This caused tensions among the residents who were left out of the registration exercise. There has also been an increase in protest around restrictions that

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[5] Several cases of animal theft and property destruction have been reported in Turkana East, Pokot East and Baringo North between March and August 2020.
[6] In April 2020, the Turkana County government set up a KES 441 million fund for relief food as part of the measures to mitigate against effects of COVID-19. According to the West Pokot County Treasury of February 2020, the County government provided for KES 5.828 billion for the financial year 2020/21, part of which included funds allocated to enhancing food and nutrition security. http://www.westpokot.go.ke/images/Final__CFSP__2020.pdf

affect economic activities: Boda-boda riders, livestock traders, charcoal and firewood sellers are disgruntled with the government directives as their businesses have been affected. Boda boda riders in the main urban centers have reportedly begun defying government directives and vowed to retaliate against security agents due to alleged harassment and mistreatment especially during the curfew hours. Livestock traders have also had altercations with police officers as they enforce social distancing in the markets.

Misinformation regarding COVID-19:

Some radio stations have been accused of giving false information related to COVID-19 e.g. one community radio station reported that the Turkana women representative and senator had exhibited COVID-19 symptoms and were in isolation. The supporters of the women representative and senator protested this information on social media. Fear, lack of and misinformation has led to stigmatisation and discrimination that may also impact negatively on national and county level efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19, in addition to increasing social tensions. Creating awareness amongst members of the public has not had the impact expected because this sensitisation is done in English and Kiswahili without consideration of the rural communities. In addition, it was reported that communities especially from urban areas have been gradually migrating to the rural areas in fear of contracting COVID-19. They are however not received well by those in the rural areas as they are suspected to be infected with the virus. In Lodwar town, Chinese road

contractors have been stigmatised since the virus is thought to have originated from China. These perceptions are likely to further affect social cohesion, which is critical in the rapidly challenging context.

Domestic and gender-based violence is reportedly on the rise, attributed to diminished household incomes and health concerns but few cases are reported to formal security institutions due to fear of retaliation from community members.[7] The closure of schools as part of the measures to control the COVID-19 outbreak contributed to increased incidents of sexual and gender-based violence, teenage pregnancies and child marriages that may result in increased school dropout rates, particularly of girls, in both counties.

Effects of the pandemic on cross-border trade and migration:

In Turkana County, participants shared that along the Loima and Turkana west corridor, border closure due to COVID-19 has led to increased insecurity. This is because majority of the people at the border points access food from across the border in Moroto, Kotido and Napak districts of Uganda. They also sell their livestock across the border but are now unable to do so, thus affecting their livelihoods and causing economic disruption. The mutual sharing agreements on scarce resources along the border lines have also been disrupted and are a recipe for conflict and tensions in the period of the pandemic and after.

(Photo/Istock)

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[7] According to the ICRC Lodwar office, SGBV cases in Turkana rose from 17 cases reported in January 2020 to 48 cases reported in September 2020. This reflects a steady rise in reports in the county. Additionally, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported that in the counties of Wajir, Turkana, Kisii, West Pokot, Nandi, Lamu, Homa Bay and Kisumu, there was a 30% increase in incidents of violence since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/kenya/

RESPONSE MECHANISMS IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Simmering inter-communal conflicts between the Pokot and Turkana communities have been evident particularly at the border areas. During the period following the outbreak of the pandemic, the region has witnessed several conflicts related to cattle rustling. Incidences reported between late June 2020 and August 2020[8] are feared to be raids and counter raids and that though several are linked to criminal activities[9] where individuals should be held culpable, they have only served to increase already existing tensions at the borders of Pokot, Turkana and Karamoja communities.

Despite the challenges currently being faced, both formal and informal peace actors have been engaged in various initiatives meant to pacify the communities and prevent escalation of the conflicts:

CSIC and County Government engagements:
A disarmament exercise was undertaken through the CSICs and local community structures in Turkana and Pokot counties before the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya and it was noted that this exercise served to contribute to peace and security in the region to some extent as several weapons were surrendered during the disarmament. In addition, Turkana County government has had several engagements including visits to the neighbouring West Pokot County, and to Uganda, South Sudan and Ethiopia to engage leaders on fostering peace in the region, information sharing for enhanced cohesion and negotiating economic activities to promote peaceful coexistence among the communities.

Civil society peace interventions:
CSOs both local and international, working on peace, security and humanitarian responses, have been actively engaged in fostering peace and cohesion amongst the communities in the counties affected by conflict. In recent months, they have increased cross boundary initiatives with a view to responding to the systemic conflicts while also assisting communities to understand and mitigate against COVID-19 infections. Though the infections in the two counties are relatively low, CSOs have been engaged in sensitising communities through the local radio stations to debunk myths around the belief that COVID-19 is an urban based disease and that rural communities are also at risk. The CSOs are also working to ensure that cases of discrimination against those suspected of having COVID-19 do not emerge. In addition, and upon realisation that conflicts are continuing unabated despite the spread of the pandemic, CSOs have been involved in working with communities at the Kraal (village) level to address conflicts related to extractives along the border areas.

Community level peace and security structures:
The perennial conflicts in the region have resulted in the emergence of strong community structures whose leadership is mostly committed to working towards building and promoting lasting solutions to the conflicts through working on the core issues. These structures Nyumba Kumi, Kraal leaders, council of elders, grazing committees, peace committees (sub-county level, ward level and cross-border) and youth groups (such as reformed youth), among others. These structures are still engaged in peace and security despite the threat presented by COVID-19. These structures have also worked in partnership with CSOs to sensitise their communities on COVID-19 while also identifying and reporting anyone going against the government directives. They have been instrumental in promoting cohesion and related initiatives especially in areas where CSOs are unable to reach due to restriction in movement and open conflict. This has served to strengthen their engagements with their communities and improve their image as trusted groups.

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[8] In late June 2020, the Pokot of Akoret location, Tiaty Sub County in Baring, allegedly raided Nabeitom and Kamuke villages in Turkana East and South sub counties and made away with large herds of livestock. This led to retaliation from Turkana warriors on 6nJuly 2020 in Akoret location where 2 Turkana communities lost their lives while 2 Pokot herders were injured, and livestock stolen.

[9] On 8 July 2020, thieves allegedly from Turkana County stole 6 goats from a resident of West Pokot County. The goats were tracked and recovered by the Turkana-Pokot cross-border peace committee and successfully returned to the owner the following day, witnessed by Police officers at Nakwamoru Police post. Also, on 8 July 2020, a man from Lami Nyeusi was found dead at Kainuk trading centre. The perpetrators are unknown, and the Police are yet to conduct an autopsy to confirm the cause of death.

IMPACT OF NATIONAL LEVEL DECISIONS ON THE COUNTY AND COMMUNITY LEVEL

After the outbreak of COVID-19 in Kenya, the government took decisive steps towards prevention of the spread of the disease. The decisions made impacted the counties in various ways. In Turkana and West Pokot counties, the directives served to increase tensions to some extent particularly due to the nature of implementation and enforcement of the directives.

For instance, information around the introduction of a curfew took many residents by surprise as they held the view that the disease was only spreading in the city and that they were not affected. Sensitisation exercises had to be undertaken to encourage the local communities to wear masks and wash their hands regularly or ensure that they sanitise. This proved a challenge as the local communities can ill afford to purchase sanitisers and masks at the expense of buying food for their families.

Participants reported that directives such as the introduction of curfew hours limited the amount of time that local communities could access food and other basic services. In addition, it was felt that there was little to no consultations with the communities when implementing these directives as they did not take into consideration, community level income generating activities which were now limited in scope. The cost of transport also became prohibitive, leaving communities feeling exploited while lack of clarity and understanding between the communities, health officials and other government institutions added to the challenge of implementation.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEACE AND SECURITY

The disruption of what communities consider normal life, including disruption to livelihood activities as a result of COVID-19, is likely to increase the risk of violent conflict along the Turkana-West Pokot border areas as well as in hot spots within the two counties.[10] Though various actors, both state and non-state, are involved in various activities towards promoting peace and security, a lot more can be done to improve the fragile situation. The following are suggested entry points for peace and security in the context of COVID-19 and particularly in the recovery period:

1. Promotion of resource sharing among pastoral communities within and between the two counties and with cross-border communities, through implementation of community peace agreements, where available, as directed through community structures that include grazing committees, among others.

2. Dialogue meetings (virtual and physical where possible) with the political leadership from the two communities to remind them of commitments made in the past especially regarding community peace agreements and to enhance collaboration in building peace. Initiatives such as those driven by the county government of Turkana should be encouraged amongst leaders in the region. In addition, intercommunity dialogue meetings should be held, for instance, in areas such as Lopirchich water point, Apuke and Nariwamoru that are facing high risk of violence.

3. Review status of implementation of previous agreements between communities to establish status of implementation, what worked well and what did not work well, and to come up with a reviewed road map (where necessary) for implementing peace agreements during and after COVID-19.

4. Promote conflict sensitive approaches to COVID-19 response and recovery interventions by CSOs, government structures including health institutions and security agencies, private sector and other actors to avoid doing harm and exacerbating tensions particularly among communities.

5. Seize the opportunity presented by the COVID-19 crisis to build a broad social compact with community structures and local leaders, as part of a strategy to enhance the trust of ordinary citizens on the current efforts to flatten the curve.

6. Encourage and support partnership with inter-county peace and security stakeholders to build consensus on peace and security intervention approaches in the context of the pandemic.

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[10] The areas include Turkana South areas of Kaputir, Kalemngorok and Kainuk, In Turkana East the current conflict could erupt in areas of Lomelo, Kapedo, Nadome, Lochwaa Kula,and Lokori. In Loima sub-county there is a likelihood of conflict emerging between Turkana and Pokot in areas of Kotaruk, Lorengipi, Lobei and Loya; Recent mapping identified Akoret location in West Pokot, Tiaty sub-county of Baringo County, Nabeitom and Kamuke villages in Turkana East and South sub-counties, Loima, Kakong village, Kaputir location Turkana County; Takaywa village in Kaptolomwo location in West Pokot county; Kainuk trading centre.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- In order to ensure support for interventions especially from the communities, responses to the pandemic must be conflict-sensitive, starting with an analysis of how COVID-19 and related responses are affecting drivers of the conflict and violence. An all-inclusive approach to manage COVID-19 is a gap both from national and county governments which needs attention. Policymakers and COVID-19 coordination mechanisms should include expertise that explicitly brings in an analysis of fragility, risk factors for conflict, and violence dynamics, to understand the impacts the curfews, county lockdowns and other measures will have on risk factors of violence.

- Local ownership and leadership of peacebuilding interventions with a focus on long-term resilience should be embedded into technical health responses, as well as broader socioeconomic responses to COVID-19. The way in which peacebuilding is integrated into local and national responses is critical not only for the success of these responses, but also to understand whether they support peace and cohesion or might exacerbate new or existing grievances triggered by the pandemic.

- Empowering local pastoral communities to build and support multi-ethnic coalitions and promoting broad-based interest groups can reverse the conflict trends into a relationship of mutual reciprocity thus encouraging peaceful coexistence.

- There should be state and non-state support to an integrated, multi-media public information campaign promoting conflict prevention and social cohesion while debunking myths surrounding COVID-19. Investment should be made to support efforts to share impartial news and information about COVID-19 to counter rumours and real or perceived political manipulation of the crisis as well as to keep a spotlight on conflicts that require urgent intervention.

About The REINVENT Programme