

CONFLICT IN PASTORALIST AREAS OF SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA



Introduction

This briefing paper is one of six on specific topics of importance affecting pastoralists and their livelihood systems in Africa. It supplements the parent document *Pastoralism in Africa: A Primer* and describes the key elements and issues associated with conflict in pastoralist areas across sub-Saharan Africa. It is intended to provide basic information to United States Agency for International Development (USAID) staff and their partners with limited experience in the sector. While conflict can be defined as an incompatibility of opinions, principles, or interests and can often be a positive force for social change, in this brief, it can be considered shorthand for violent conflict. Conflict associated with pastoralism is increasingly complex and often not well understood. It is sometimes associated with problematic negative narratives suggesting it is inherent to the pastoralist livelihood system, or reflects pastoralists being “backward” compared to people involved in other livelihoods, like agriculture. However, as the brief explains, weak governance is often at the core of repeated or persistent conflict in pastoralist areas.

Current trends in conflict in pastoralist areas

Challenges of data: Historically, it has been very difficult to obtain accurate data on most forms of conflict in low-income countries. In Africa's drylands, this situation is especially apparent due to remoteness, underreporting, sensitivity of the information,¹ and context-specific variations in freedom of the press and media bias.² Although modern communications have reduced these constraints, issues of data reliability and accuracy still remain, not least as datasets often rely heavily on scanning media sources. Therefore, data on conflicts should be interpreted with caution.

Two key, strong open sources of conflict data are available to understand trends, viz., the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), developed by Uppsala University,³ and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) collection, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that emerged from the University of Sussex. For example, UCDP breaks data down by country, stakeholder, and type of violence (e.g., state, nonstate, and one-sided). Thus, Ethiopia nationally has 90 conflict stakeholders identified, including regional state actors. Considering nonstate dyads or triads of conflict, UCDP lists 53, with most involving either pastoralist ethnic groups or groups present in pastoralist areas.⁴ While the UCDP data enable some level of trend analysis within specific conflict dyads (e.g., between the pastoralist Borana and Gabra in East Africa), the analysis is limited because comprehensive data are generally only available from the early 1990s. Trend analysis is further hindered by how pastoralist conflict is defined, the increasing complexity of conflicts creating challenges of attribution and categorization,⁵ and the diverse ways in which conflict has evolved, sometimes over hundreds of years.⁶ Conflict can also be highly dynamic over time. It may be latent for years, only to reemerge in a series of intense violent events.

Overall, the data and literature suggest that current trends in conflict in pastoralist areas are mixed, complex, and inconsistent, but with a general increase in conflict in Africa at the current time. Notably, when the State is involved, conflict events and associated deaths increase significantly. The examples below demonstrate the diversity and complexity in Africa's pastoralist areas:⁷

- Increased conflict between pastoralists and farmers in West Africa, e.g., Nigeria experienced 1,300 deaths from January to August 2018.⁸
- In the Sahel, there is declining violence with Fulani militias since 2018, e.g., 1,868 fatalities from January to October, but this includes farmer-herder conflict, violence between militias, and violence by Fulani militants. This compares to 1,536 fatalities involving Boko Haram in the same period.⁹
- Across the Sahel, the spread of insecurity and forms of conflict involving pastoralists have shifted over the past ten years as Fulani, in particular, may be recruited to Islamic militant groups in Burkina Faso, Niger, and

1 Usually from the government perspective, as national security issues may be considered reflected in the events, depending on how they are interpreted. For example, if conflict events include perceived threats from groups considered extremists or classified as terrorists.

2 See for example, Dietrich and Eck, 2020. See also both Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) notes on their methodologies to be found at their websites, which articulate sources, approaches, and constraints.

3 <https://ucdp.uu.se/encyclopedia> and <https://acleddata.com/about-aced/>.

4 See for example, UCDP website: <https://ucdp.uu.se/country/530>.

5 For example, if a conflict between two groups who may be pastoralists takes place in an urban center with the primary cause associated with politics, is that pastoral conflict? Or is it political conflict?

6 For example, one may have access to some regional trends, if there are specific analyses available or there are developed datasets.

7 See for example Cilliers, 2018, which notes that conflicts involving militant Islamism are particularly persistent. However, also important to note is that, when considered within a longer historical context, conflict levels overall in Africa have been declining since the end of the Cold War.

8 See Nnoko-Mewanu, 2018.

9 See Matfess, 2018.

- Mali.¹⁰ In Nigeria, targets of Fulani conflict have shifted to government and civilians.¹¹
- In Kenya's North Rift region, there were 69 political violence events involving pastoralist militias in 2023, an increase compared to 2022. Violence involving pastoralist militias accounts for almost 30% of all political violence events in Kenya in the first quarter of 2023, resulting in ca. 73 fatalities.¹²
- From 1989 to 2022, there were reportedly 279 deaths amongst Karamajong agropastoralists in Uganda.¹³

Costs of conflict

There is no doubt that conflict continues to cause appalling loss of human life in pastoralist areas of Africa and is a major hindrance to economic development and service provision, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Negative impacts from conflict in pastoralist areas on affected populations¹⁴

Direct impacts	Indirect impacts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loss of life, increased morbidity, trauma, displacement Impoverishment and destitution, particularly for women and children Loss of productive assets e.g., livestock, household goods, crops, etc. Constrained access to resources, e.g. pasture, water, markets, services, social networks Constrained mobility, especially for women Increased vulnerability to violence, especially for women Reduced social capital and cohesion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disruption of development opportunities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children's access to education, for example Regression of economic development Disincentives for economic investments outside of war economies Disincentives for service delivery Decrease in options for social capital development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborative ventures—breakdown in trust Joint governance initiatives Intermarriages Rise in overall raiding, insecurity, and escalation Rise in investment and prevalence in small arms, feeding cycles of violence Consequences of displacement: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pressures on resources, including the environment Further tensions between hosts and refugees, internally displaces persons (IDPs)

Conflicts in the rangelands often take place in geographically peripheral areas of countries already experiencing forms of marginalization from the center,¹⁵ in turn impacting the most vulnerable people, who are often pastoralists. There is a strong interconnection between conflict and poverty, which has consequences for conflict persistence.¹⁶ Horizontal inequalities may increase motivation to fight, ease of recruitment, political and religious co-option, and polarization, which in turn increases the possibility of violence, especially if overlaid by ethnic fault lines.

10 Cissé, 2020.

11 <https://acleddata.com/2018/10/05/fulani-militias-in-nigeria-declining-violence-not-a-sign-of-lasting-peace/>.

12 Matfess, 2018.

13 See UCDP, n.d.

14 Adapted and augmented from Table 3.3a: Impacts of Conflict on Pastoral Development Prospects (p. 21) in Nori et al., n.d.

15 See for example Pavanello, 2009.

16 See for example, for a succinct synopsis, Marks, 2016.



Types of conflict

There are various types of conflict in pastoralist areas, often with multiple root causes and with perpetrators co-opted and linked into local, national, or regional politics associated with ethnic identity politics, access to resources, or religion. However, in simple terms, one can consider three typologies:

“Traditional” pastoralist conflicts: such as livestock raiding between neighboring pastoralist/agropastoralist tribes or clans, especially in East Africa. Originally, raiding was linked with acquiring livestock to pay for marriage, as a rite of passage into manhood, as an expression of masculinity, to accumulate wealth or recoup livestock losses, or as a response to hunger. These forms were governed by traditional community mechanisms. There was also a redistributive function in livestock raiding driven by drought cycles, ensuring the overall stability of the pastoralist system across the regions. Multiple examples of these foundational patterns are found across the Horn of Africa, and these conflicts can occur at any time of year.

Herder-farmer conflicts: Historically, pastoralism and crop farming in areas such the Sahel were complementary and regulated by local institutions. However, since colonial times formal polices have sought to separate these two livelihood systems. This has contributed to misperceptions that pastoralism and farming are inherently incompatible. Today, pastoralist-farmer conflicts occur across Africa but are particularly apparent in West Africa. Here, farmers may use land considered by pastoralists to be their traditional pastureland and part of very extensive transhumant mobility patterns. Wherever pastoralist livestock are in close proximity to crops, there is a risk of conflict, and unregulated expansion of cultivated areas increases this risk.

Natural resource conflicts: These conflicts are typically between pastoralists and relate to access to pasture or water. These conflicts can be localized or can occur at a wider scale and become part of territorial and boundary conflicts, driven by complex mixes of historical, political, resource access, and other factors. In these cases, the resources in question may not be limited to natural resources but could include strategically important towns, markets, or infrastructure (physical capital). In some cases, changing management and administration of key natural resources—including systems introduced by development programs—may affect traditional ownership and access, becoming contested and so affecting conflict dynamics.¹⁷ Conflict associated with these factors can occur at any time.

Complex conflicts: Progressively, the majority of these conflicts are non-traditional and increasingly complex, driven by multiple causes. These are likely to be a combination of grievances over structural causes (e.g., poverty or marginalization in some form) and identity politics, which are then harnessed and co-opted by politicians or militants. The nature of the linkages with politics depends very much on the context, and may be associated with elections, direct political power, and access to resources. Or it may be linked to other dimensions of identity politics such as militant Islamism or violent extremism and associated ideologies. Countries with substantial pastoralist populations can be affected by long-term complex emergencies, driven by political instability, e.g., South Sudan and Somalia.

Factors and changing nature of conflicts

Macro trends affecting conflicts and their dynamics: Generally speaking, pastoralist conflicts, particularly those still involving traditional dynamics, tend to be low intensity, involving “drip-drip” killings or deaths, with periodic events or flare-ups of activity between longer periods of relative calm. However, the form, location, and nature of these interactions is also changing due to:

- *Population growth:* may involve urbanization, creation of new settlements, bringing people into contact with each other more often or increasing pressure on natural resource (e.g., water). Increasing numbers of livestock may also create greater pressures on rangelands and pastures.¹⁸
- *Changing land use:* Aside from demands on land availability associated with population growth, large-scale developments are also impacting land use (e.g., infrastructure, industrialization, or extractive industries such as mines). In addition, increased use of land for farming may block transhumant routes (e.g., in Nigeria and Karamoja, Uganda), causing deviations in mobility patterns or conflictual interactions.

Environmental degradation and climate change: is increasingly affecting people and population movements, migration and behaviors. For example, in Somalia, drought-induced, large-scale movement of people and their remaining livestock has created new settlements (and conflict with host communities) as they are displaced and forced to settle in locations other than their traditional lands. Changing water availability and altered vegetation patterns are also affecting behaviors and the viability of landscapes and livelihood systems as previously practiced. Changing temperatures due to climate change are also affecting populations of livestock disease vectors and vegetation patterns.

¹⁷ See for example, Richards et al., 2015.

¹⁸ Livestock population growth is more susceptible to fluctuations depending on a combination of market factors, environmental conditions, and occasional disease patterns. However, changing the composition of livestock herds may increase livelihood resilience of pastoralists but may also affect conflict dynamics as, for example, adopting browsers may enable access to other sorts of vegetation and lands that may not be their own. For example, in the past, Borana used to only herd cattle, but increasingly also have camels and goats, enabling them to move into shrub areas belonging to other tribes, which has increased tensions.

Politicization of identity groups: The co-option of strong pastoralist identity groups for political purposes is of great concern to peacebuilders. At its worst, the manipulation of localized pastoralist conflicts, harnessing ethnic enmities, can feed into political instability and exacerbate civil wars that affect whole nations. These then play a role in the creation, maintenance, and intractability of such conflicts, which become complex chronic emergencies. The classic examples are South Sudan, where Nuer-Dinka conflicts have become a major fault line between political groups,¹⁹ and the Sudan, where predominantly Baggara Arabs have become incorporated into militias such as the Janjaweed against other ethnic groups. This has since morphed into the Rapid Support Forces of Mohamed Hamdan, known as Hemeti, which is deeply involved in the current power struggles and conflict in Sudan. Aside from the humanitarian cost of complex chronic emergencies that continue for decades, there is also the potential challenges associated with the “bad neighborhood syndrome,” which suggests that large areas of political instability can start to influence, pervade, and destabilize neighboring countries.²⁰ This appears to have been the case in the Sahel with the insurrections across the region, while it is continuing concern in the Horn of Africa.²¹

Commercialization and criminalization of livestock raiding: A trend across Africa is the commercialization of livestock raiding and use of automatic weapons. This has long been the case in East Africa, with organized crime involved deeply in cattle raiding in Kenya and Uganda. But the patterns affecting this phenomenon are also changing; for example, increase in scale, associated violence, and involvement of politicians and businessmen in Kenya, or in the case of the Karamoja in Uganda, the collusion of security forces.²² In West Africa, increasingly bandits are involved, as well as militias and groups such as Boko Haram in Cameroon, Nigeria, and the Chad Basin, who are reportedly using cattle raiding to fund their activities.

Drivers and maintenance factors for persistence of conflicts involving pastoralists

Structural issues: A combination of fundamental issues affect the persistence of these conflicts that take place in the landscapes where pastoralist groups are prevalent. These may include:

- *Historical factors:* The creation of state and administrative borders divide ethnic groups, or cross livelihood systems where the location of natural resources necessitates travel to them. They also create different governance and policy systems across borders, impacting these populations. Colonial legacies and settlement patterns may also affect land ownership, use, and access, permanently disrupting viable ways of life in addition to generating accompanying grievances from these injustices.
- *Ongoing economic, social, and political marginalization:* Often pastoralist areas may be peripheral to centers of economy and political power. Urban centers and capitals tend to be located in resource-rich areas able to sustain populations. These then become centers of political power. Inevitably this tends to result in the marginalization of the vast, sparsely populated rangelands in terms of resource allocation, service provision, and involvement in national life. This situation is not helped by the natural necessity for movement and mobility for those following this form of livelihood system, which results in their being underserved in terms of resource allocation.²³

19 E.g., the militarization of cattle-raiding. See Wild et al., 2018.

20 Iqbal and Starr, 2008.

21 Nsaibian and Duhamel, 2021.

22 For an overview, see Aucoin and Mahmood, 2017.

23 There is an ongoing debate concerning the relationship between absolute poverty and pastoralists. Pastoralists may perceive themselves as wealthy in terms of livestock and the capital assets within their herds. However, if one considers other dimensions of poverty such as levels of education, vulnerability (increasingly so with climate change), access to health, and other indicators, then pastoralists tend to be amongst the poorer demographics.

A failure of governance: However, at the root of the conflicts and issues facing pastoralists and agropastoralists is a fundamental failure of governance, with two key dimensions:

- 1. Rule of law and security.** The concept of nation states is not of great importance to pastoralists still deeply identifying with their way of life. What is important is being able to move with their animals as they see fit to pastures. However, from a state-centric perspective, securing large, remote, inaccessible rangeland areas is deeply problematic. They are often in borderlands, without transport infrastructure, which would need significant resources in personnel and vehicles to monitor and police them properly. State security systems are unable to respond in a timely fashion to incidents, given distance, lack of communications, and resources. This undermines community trust and confidence in the state security system's abilities.²⁴ In addition, statutory law and use of western-evolved legal systems rely heavily on witnesses, use of evidence, and recognition of individual culpability. In these locations, crimes are rarely witnessed and perpetrators are rarely caught or prosecuted successfully in the courts. Traditional pastoralist cultures also may be based on community responsibility and obligations. Thus, for example amongst the Somalis, *Xeer*, (traditional legal system) is employed to guide restitution payments or *Diya* ("blood money") to injured families for their losses rather than punishing the individual.

Unfortunately, traditional legal systems or conflict and natural resource management mechanisms have been eroded or distorted, resulting in an overall lack of strong governance in these areas, exacerbated by the availability of and lack of control of small arms. This has generally led to a militarization of security in these borderlands, which has also been exacerbated by the changing nature of conflicts that are morphing in the Sahel into jihadi rebellions.

- 2. Government policy and implementation arenas.** Historically, particularly in East Africa, the policy arena supporting and encouraging pastoralist livelihood systems was weak and subordinated to agriculture. Increasingly, there are now positive policies in the African Union (AU) but more importantly at the Regional Economic Community (REC) level in both the Horn of Africa under the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) as well as in West Africa under the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). These organizations acknowledge the importance of pastoralism and seek to provide protocols safeguarding mobility and the ability to cross international borders. However, while there may be written policies, these are not necessarily implemented at the local level. In some countries, like Ethiopia, there are competing policies that may be unwritten but directly counter the intent behind pastoralist protection policies; for example, the policy of "sedentarizing" the population and creating barriers to pastoralist movement within their transhumant systems, ostensibly in the name of improved service provision.²⁵ Similarly, water use policies may be aimed at maximizing agricultural usage and irrigation at the expense of pastoralist needs. More positively, in Karamoja, some local districts have started the process of gazetting cattle migration routes and introducing new movement protocols for those with livestock to reduce conflicts with other groups such as farmers. However, the governance of natural resources, land, and its safeguarding to maintain the viability of this important livelihood system needs significantly more investment.

24 Let alone the entrenched prejudice and racism sometimes involved in security institutions, which are usually staffed by tribes or ethnic groups from other parts of the country.

25 For example, in Southern Ethiopia in Borena there have been reports of woredas trying to limit pastoral movement to within the woreda by allocating wet and dry season pasture areas. However, these are insufficiently large areas to operate properly within the pastoral livelihood system or take into account the existing water resources needed.

Addressing conflicts in pastoralist areas

As in all conflict-affected environments, good practice dictates that development and humanitarian actors undertake a conflict analysis, no matter the nature of the intervention. There are multiple frameworks and guides available, as donors and international agencies often vary slightly in their approaches to the task. Classic examples are provided by USAID and the UK Foreign and Development Commonwealth Office.²⁶ Increasingly though, given the evolving nature and complexity of these conflicts, it is even more useful to consider adopting a blended approach between a classic conflict analysis and political economy analysis (PEA) approach. This critically takes more of a systems-thinking approach as it considers the incentives and interests of different actors as well as rooting understanding within that society, considering the role of formal and informal institutions, policies, and norms in shaping behaviors. Following such an exercise, practical conflict-sensitive programming approaches should be adopted.²⁷ Conflict sensitivity is a straightforward concept in theory, but much harder to undertake well in practice, being an ongoing process requiring continual investment. Essentially it involves three steps: first, considering the context in which you are operating; second, understanding the interactions between your program and the context; and third, adjusting your program to avoid negative impacts and maximize positive impacts. Do No Harm principles are also useful, but are often interpreted as minimal standards, so they are best used in conjunction with conflict-sensitivity approaches.

Conclusion

Pastoralism is a critical livelihood system that is highly adapted to Africa's semi-arid and arid lands, and is the most efficient sustainable use of the natural resource base. However, conflict in pastoralist areas is becoming increasingly complex, multidimensional, and linked into political and criminal systems with a variety of macro trends impacting it. These trends, coupled with evolving political contexts, result in changes to the form of conflict, its location, and the nature of associated violence. A failure to both safeguard and support pastoralism (in both policy and praxis) as an important viable livelihood system, as well as take into consideration and address governance issues and conflict dynamics in all resilience and livelihood programming, risks reinforcing persistent problems and its viability into the future. Safeguarding and supporting pastoralism means intentionally integrating conflict transformation programming into resilience, climate change, governance, and livelihood programs.

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²⁶ Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, 2004; and Goodhand et al., 2002.

²⁷ Ideally, a conflict analysis/PEA should be conducted in a participatory manner with the staff of the organization concerned under the guidance of someone well versed in conflict analysis. Aside from drawing on their knowledge and embedding the issues within their consciousness, serving as a capacity-enhancing exercise, it is rarely put to good use if an external consultant undertakes it as a stand-alone assignment.

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Further Reading

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