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Cross-Border Intergroup Conflicts in the Horn of Africa: A Case Study of Ethiopia-South Sudan Borderland People

By Tasew Gashaw, Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding Scholar
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The Horn of Africa is one of the most insecure regions in Africa. This insecurity manifests itself in many ways, including conflict and terrorism, and driven by al-Shabaab activities, the region has established itself as one of the major terrorist corridors in the world. Even though the Organization of African Unity (OAU) passed the Cairo Resolution in 1964 to respect colonial borders, most international borders in the Horn of Africa are porous, volatile, contested, and fragile. The porousness, volatility, and fragility of the borders makes them vulnerable to smugglers and illicit trade, which further inflames tensions, and leads to cross-border intergroup conflicts.[1] At the state level, relations between the center and the borderlands at the periphery are also disconnected in terms of development, political participation, economic inclusion, infrastructure, and other public services. In this regard, the borderland people are marginalized and unshielded from external economic, social, and political pressures. It is in this environment that the Ethiopia-South Sudan borderland people conflict is situated.

Tensions Among the Ethiopia-South Sudan Borderland People

Imperial Ethiopia and the British colony of the Sudan settled the Ethiopia-Sudan border in 1902.[2] Currently, Ethiopia and South Sudan share an 874 km (543 miles) border along the Gambella region; however, this border

is open and fragile. The majority of people living along the border are the Nuer, Anyuaa, and Murle—all of whom are Nilotic groups and share similar socio-cultural activities.[3] The Nuer and Murle are nomadic pastoralists that depend on livestock and move from place to place, including across the border. The Anyuaa are agrarian, controlling the right and left banks of the rivers and arid zones for their land cultivation practices.

People along the border suffer from a lack of infrastructure and education, exclusion from social and state services, and cross-border intergroup conflicts. The South Sudanese government's lack of inclusion

Figure 1: Ethiopia- South Sudan Border in the Horn of Africa[4]

of these people in development, and Ethiopia's insufficient use of economic inclusion and diversification has resulted in weak development performance and low skilled labor in the semi-autonomous regional state of Gambella. Border communities in this region of Ethiopia lack infrastructure, community health centers, and schools and are affected by wide-spread poverty. These problems expose the communities to a Pandora's Box of human security challenges such as famine, drought, disease, and environmental degradation.

## Cross-Border Intergroup Conflicts Along the Border

The porous borders coupled with weak local government administration contribute to the intensity of corruption, illicit trade, smuggling of goods, circulation of small arms, and border insurgents. Illegal traders profit from open borders by circulating small arms and light weapons. The proliferation of small arms is a serious threat to peace and security in the pastoral areas.[5] Youths have adopted a "No Gun, No Life" slogan to strengthen their community and protect themselves from external enemies. The proliferation of small arms and external threats has also led to an increase in the practices of cattle raiding and child abduction. In this regard, the borderland people have labeled each other as enemies and exercised force to protect their group from attack by other groups.

With the availability of small arms, cattle rustling and child abductions have become more frequent and fatal. Over the years, insurgent groups among the Murle have increasingly killed more civilians, rustled more cattle, and abducted more children, especially from communities that are not well protected such as the Anyuaa and Jikany-Nuer of Ethiopia.

Most fighting ends with casualties on both sides, with the winner destroying villages, raiding cattle, and abducting children. For instance, in 2010 Murle insurgents raided 960 cattle, abducted 72 children, and killed 247 people. In 2016, the Murle destroyed an Anyuaa mini-village in Gog, killing 16 people and abducting six children. Similarly, two weeks later, an organized group of Murle fought with the Jikany-Nuer, killing 208 people, raiding 2,000 cattle, and abducting 131 children. In the same year, the Lou Nuer attacked the Ethiopian Jikany-Nuer and Anyuaa in the Akobo district of Gambella, destroying 21 villages and displacing around 4,000 people.[7]

Table 1 shows a dramatic rise in the frequency of the Murle's cattle raiding and child abduction from the Anyuaa and Jikany-Nuer, highlighting the number of people killed during the confrontation since 2004 and indicating a particular surge since 2010.

Table 1: Increment of rustled cattle, abducted children, and killed people by the Murle since 2004[6]
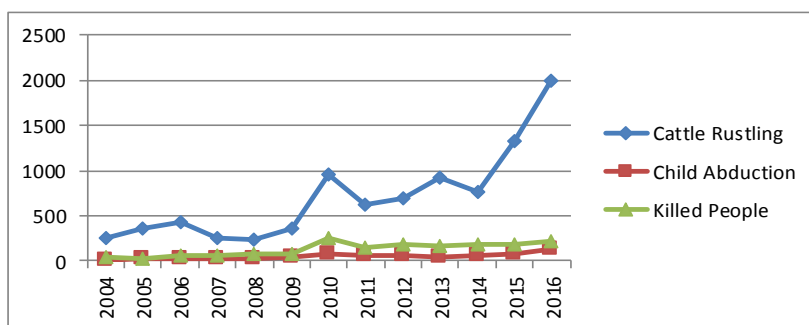
In response to the Murle attacks, both Anyuaa and Jikany-Nuer cross the border and instigate revenge attacks. In 2011, Lou Nuer fought with the Murle youth in Jonglei State and killed more than 600 people.[8] These repeated cross-border attacks have cost the lives of hundreds of people, resulted in the loss of thousands of cattle, separated children from their families, and increased the number of internally displaced people.

What Triggers the Borderland Antagonism and Tensions?

Limited natural resources and unequal access to and distribution of natural resources is a major trigger of conflict in the borderlands. Land and cattle are the main sources of wealth and livelihood for the borderland communities. The natural resources available are limited and unevenly controlled among the Anyuaa, Nuer, and Murle. Furthermore, the local government institutions are not strong enough to administer the borderland's natural resources. Thus, there is limited supply, access to, and regulation of resources from the central and local governments, and it is in this context that disputes over pastureland and water often trigger conflicts.

Culturally, the agriculturalist Anyuaa believe that all land belongs to them and they want to preserve their ancestors' property. On the other hand, the nomadic and pastoralist Murle and Jikany-Nuer require vast land for grazing and water, which means they often encroach on the land that the Anyuaa believe belongs solely to their people. The Murle also believe that all cattle in the world are their ancestors' property and that they have a cultural mission to collect them, including by cattle rustling from other groups. Besides cultural assumptions of the Murle and Anyuaa, environment-related stresses such as drought mean that pastoralist groups move around in search of water and pastureland in dry seasons. Moreover, persistent drought, unsustainable land use, and overgrazing methods have destroyed the eco-zone of borderland regions. A combination of all these factors, along with traditional resource distribution and cultural assumptions serves to perpetuate hostilities.

Challenges Along the Ethiopia-South Sudan Border

Challenge 1: Border Porousness

The Ethiopia and South Sudan border is porous and open. The porousness of the border encourages some in the borderland communities to participate in different illegal activities, including in the flow of small arms and light weapons, cattle raiding, child abductions, and intergroup conflicts. Border porosity also means that it is difficult to counter illicit trade or security threats as people regularly cross borders without the requisite

legal documents or checks. Both the governments of Ethiopia and South Sudan have faced challenges in their efforts to implement border policies and to control illegal movement of people and goods.

Challenge 2: The Impact of South Sudan's Political Instability

South Sudan's political instability manifests itself in the border regions in two main ways. First, it has hindered the implementation of development plans and economic inclusion along the border. Nationally, 51 percent of South Sudanese live below the national poverty line, 73 percent of men and 84 percent of women are illiterate, 60 percent of roads are inaccessible during rainy season, only 1 percent of the population has access to electricity, and 4.1 million people are food insecure—conditions which extend to the border regions.[9] Second, the government does not have capacity to address the needs of security, good governance, and justice. As a result, the borderlands are often left without government protection, creating a conducive environment for the proliferation of small arms, light weapons, and armed groups that further conflicts in the borderland region.

Challenge 3: The Colonial Legacy and Fractured Interactions Among the Borderland People

The "divide and rule" colonial policy of the British undermined the norms, culture, and legitimacy of traditional institutions of the local communities. This policy divided the borderland people into different sects, destroying common understandings of their culture and creating competition among the various groups. Gradually, the borderland people lost their sense of commonality and the social capital of their cultural values, including deference to norms related to tolerance, respect, and support, decreased. Nothing has been developed to replace these lost norms, and today, interactions among the borderland people remain largely fractured and focused on ethnic identity, in-group and out-group formation, and the limited daily social contact with external communities. Thus, interactions are largely organized around ethnicity as a means of safeguarding their lives and livelihoods to the exclusion of any other groups.

Challenge 4: Disintegration of State and Customary Institutions

The customary institutions that govern the borderland people tend to lack formal integration into, or articulation with, government structures. In many ways, government institutions have overruled customary institutions and the authority of elders and traditional leaders by making unilateral decisions about local affairs without consulting community elders or institutions. In so doing, the central government has excluded the traditional institutions by degrading their decision-making power. For example, the Ethiopian military regime forbade the Anyuaa kingdom's traditional governing institutions such as the *Nyieya* and *Kwaaro*, as they considered them to be "feudal," "backward," or "anti-revolutionary."[3,10] Where the institutions still exist, they are no longer strong enough to manage youths' participation in conflict. The central government and traditional institutions have no common working agenda regarding local affairs.

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[i] *Nyieya* is a traditional king of the Anyuaa community with a full administrative structure and power over all Anyuaa people.

[ii] *Kwaaro* is the land owner who distributes land to the people of Anyuaa and administers the people who live in his village under the supervision of *Nyieya*.

After the government institutions diminished the value of traditional institutions, elders could not manage social disorder and the communities felt that their traditional cultural values were lost. These challenges led youths to disobey elders and weakened the elders' roles in conflict resolution. For example, the Anyuaa people previously had strong relationships with their traditional institutions. However, after the military regime of Ethiopia forbade their traditional governance and rule of law mechanisms and attempted to replace them with formal institutions, the youth lost deference for their elders, further weakening traditional mechanisms. At the same time, government institutions do not have adequate representation and legitimacy in the borderland communities, and thus it is difficult for them to try to control conflicts and implement the rule of law. This has created a void where neither the modern government institutions nor the traditional governance institutions are working effectively and no one can resolve conflict when it arises. Therefore, insufficient attention to existing customary institutional arrangements has significant implications for security. Nevertheless, conflict resolution through traditional mechanisms has the potential to contribute to borderland stability and security.

Despite the government's attempts, they could not fully destroy the legitimacy of traditional institutions within borderland communities. In some critical cases the government has agreed to use traditional institutions to solve local problems. For instance, the Gambella Regional Government cooperated with the Anyuaa customary institution, *Nyieya,* in 2003 to resolve security tensions that arose between the Anyuaa and other communities over land possession.[11] Furthermore, the age-set customary institution of the Murle provides young people with significant decision-making power and helps unite them.[12] This institution has power to bring groups of youth together, and bring new leaders to the top. In doing so, the Murle youth become larger in number, granting them more mobility and fighting strength in Pibor and across the border. However, if well managed, the age-set traditional institution of the Murle has the potential to unite youth around peace and security, and reduce cattle raiding and child abduction.

Governments' Efforts to Tackle the Challenges

The governments of Ethiopia and South Sudan recognize the security problems along their border and have collaborated to try to solve them. For example, in March 2012, Ethiopia and South Sudan signed an agreement on a Joint Ministerial Commission to advance economic and political ties. Among other things, the agreement addressed transit, communications, transport, exports, education, and capacity building at the border. Following this on April 4, 2012, representatives of the regional governments agreed to undertake a range of joint activities along the shared border to address the issues of border security and to ensure sustainable peace and stability.[13]

In response to the ministerial agreement, the local governments of the Upper Nile, Miwutd County, and Gambella Regional State signed a joint border agreement on October 3-4, 2012 on the agendas of anti-peace forces and criminal matters, human capacity building, trade, investment, customs duties, and people-to-people relations.[14] The agreement aimed to create smoother borderland relations and improve the livelihoods of borderland people.

Implementation of the agreements soon followed and the Ethiopian government constructed roads, disarmed groups on its side of the border, established an illicit trade control station, regulated the cross-border trading system, provided scholarship opportunities for South Sudanese students, organized an information exchange network, and established a joint elders' reconciliation committee. On the other hand, while the government of South Sudan did undertake some disarmament along the borderland, it has yet to act on most of its commitments.

This imbalanced implementation has served to exacerbate the problems and challenges. One area of concern is the fact that the governments' attempts focus on addressing the manifestations of conflict rather than the root causes. Whereas the Ethiopian local government successfully disarmed the people, they could not provide corresponding mechanisms for protecting the population, making them vulnerable to attack by insurgents. Similarly, South Sudan's governmental efforts have consisted of collecting weapons from armed borderland groups. However, in some cases, it has taken the form of aggressive crackdown operations by military and police forces. Moreover, the South Sudanese government conducted the disarmament initiative without intensive dialogue with the community, and a lack of alternative solutions for protection or uniform disarming system worsened the growing ethnic tensions. They also lacked the capacity to implement any of the economic reforms that could help to address root causes of conflict.

The governments' efforts emphasize disarmament, but disarmament alone is not a sufficient solution. The inability of the governments' to integrate the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) with security sector reform (SSR) processes also minimized their ability to achieve long-term, sustainable results because DDR and SSR are mutually reinforcing; one cannot succeed without the other. Thus, the governments should plan, allocate resources to, implement, and evaluate both the DDR and SSR in a coordinated manner. The 2012 agreements failed to gain traction due to security gaps, lack of social consensus, South Sudanese political instability, weak institutions, and a lack of a coordinated and comprehensive implementation that addressed and sequenced security, governance, and economic elements.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The porousness of the Ethiopia and South Sudan border coupled with South Sudan's political instability and the failure of both governments to devote resources to the area aggravates the suffering of the borderland people and exacerbates their intergroup conflicts. Borderland communities are vulnerable to multifaceted challenges, and further develop hostile relations due to weak management of border security and resource scarcity. To reduce the problem, South Sudan and Ethiopia should pay attention to the root causes of insecurity and conflict of the borderland communities. In this regard, the stability of South Sudan is one of the major steps for finding a long-term solution to cross-border intergroup conflicts. Thus, long-lasting solutions to South Sudan's political instability are crucial to the peaceful coexistence of the borderland communities. However, governmental, regional, and international actors can address regional security sector reforms, integrated development, institutional reforms, border social policy, proliferation of small arms, revitalization of customary institutions, and borderland resource management.

For a set of policy option and recommendations related to cross-border intergroup conflict among Ethiopia-South Sudan borderland people, see the accompanying Africa Program Policy Brief No. 13 by Tasew Gashaw.

Tasew Gashaw was a Southern Voices Network Scholar for Peacebuilding from September to November 2017. Tasew Gashaw is working towards his PhD in Peace and Security at Addis Ababa University.

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Cover Image: A group of refugees and volunteer sanitation workers. Credit: UNICEF Ethiopia, Creative Commons. https://www.flickr.com/photos unicefethiopia/14717915816/.

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