TURKANA-DASSANECH CONFLICT: CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

A RESEARCH COMMUNICATION[1]

By: Patrick Devine, PhD[2]

Background

The Turkanas and Dassanechs are nationals of Kenya and Ethiopia respectively. These multi-ethnic nations have undergone and still are undergoing development changes since the mid-20th century. Such change usually leaves behind some individuals, groups, or sections of the national population. The above ethnic communities have been left behind by the change in question. These pastoral neighbouring communities live in a very harsh physical environment where they are exposed to the vagaries of climate/weather and their consequences – drought, occasional floods, famine, preventable ailments, livestock epidemic diseases and deaths, in the face of resource scarcity. These communities live in a region that is quite remote from capital cites which, of course, are the centres of national polity and economy. The region includes a large territorial area of 14,000 square kilometres usually referred to as the Ilemi Triangle, whose ownership is contested by countries which surround it, namely Kenya, Sudan and Ethiopia. The contest of ownership is particularly explicit between Kenya and Sudan. Ethiopia's claim of ownership is implicit, so to speak, and stems from

the claim, if not fact, that the territorial area of the Nyangatom ethnic community which is Ethiopian includes a small part of the Ilemi. The Ilemi region is utilized by both the Turkana and Dassanech for the pasture irrespective of claims and counter-claims of its ownership. By and large there is no state presence manifested by provision of political-public goods. Overall, there is no *de jure* administrative authority. This is an enticement to intercommunal violent conflict – Turkana-Dassanech in this case – with Ilemi and its environs as the platform. The foregoing constitutes the background (the exogenous variable in the language of path analysis) of Turkana-Dassanech conflict as depicted in this research communication.

Findings and Discussion.

---

[1] Note: This research was done in 2009. This paper presents in a summary format the findings of the research.

[1] Rev. Patrick. R. Devine holds an MA in Peace Studies and International Relations, and a PhD in Political Science and Public Administration. He is the founder of the Shalom Centre for Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation (SCCRR). For more information, see https://shalomconflictcenter.org/

Relations between Turkana and Dassanech communities are characterized by the frequent occurrences of incidents of localized intercommunal manifest violent conflict, among other things. The conflict is perennial. When it started is not precisely known. However, it is quite plausible that the conflict history goes back to when they first started living side by side, centuries ago. This paper presents an empirical look at the conflict. Its research problem, the puzzle that it sought to solve, in a question form is: What are the historical and contemporary causal factors of Turkana-Dassanech conflict and consequences?

The study's purpose was to understand the conflict in terms of its essence and its impact on these two communities. The overall objective of the research was to identify and delineate the causes of the conflict and their consequences. Description and explanation of the conflict identified drew on human needs theory which argues that protracted or

intractable conflicts have their primary causes in people's compelling drive to meet their unmet needs at the individual, group or societal level. According to Burton (1991), human needs theory posits that,

> the human participants in conflict situations are compulsively struggling in their respective institutional environments at all social levels to satisfy primordial and universal needs – needs as security, identity, recognition and development. They strive increasingly to gain the control of their environment that is necessary to ensure the satisfaction of these needs.
>
> (pp 82-82)

The causes of Turkana-Dassanech conflicts identified by this research include scarcity of natural resources, contested ownership-control of territory, state weakness, cultural variation (difference), pursuit of political and economic interests, proliferation of small arms and partisan component in the roles of non-governmental organizations working among the Turkana and Dassanech. However, the degree of causation varies. Each of these causes is described/explained below based on the data that were gotten from participants. The description/explanation is a highlight of the causal dynamics.

Scarcity of natural resources (usually water and pasture) contributes to conflict causation to a large extent. Actually these natural resources mediate the relationship between the vagaries of climate/weather and conflict. In other words, the vagaries create scarcity, and sometimes abundance, of these particular natural resources which, in turn, leads to intercommunal conflict. The aftermath of the vagaries typically witnesses occurrences of intercommunal conflict the purpose of which is to recoup loses of livestock stemming from the vagaries and the like. Some territorial areas (for example, high land) are valued more than others because they have resources for livestock and/or humans. This causes competition for ownership/control of them. The competition tends to lead to conflict. Conflict ensues because the ethnic community (Turkana/Dassanech) that currently controls/owns the territory prevents the ethnic other from using it. State weakness as a cause of conflict has

to do with the fact of insignificant and ineffective state presence or visibility particularly in volatile areas of the conflict zone. In other words, provision - or lack thereof - of very few security personnel to patrol the interface hot spots and their environs between Turkanas and Dassanechs, as well as the absence of other human security structures required to meet the welfare needs of the local people. A government's exercise of legitimate authority within its territorial boundaries should be monopolistic. This monopoly should include the exercise of legitimate violence. When authority is not effective, legitimacy is watered down and, consequently, non-governmental actors resort to illegitimate violence to achieve their ends. The virtual absence of a legitimate monopolistic government exercise of power continues in the Turkana-Dassanech conflict environment. Poor state security was found to be a major contributor to the conflict. Virtual lack of government authority in the conflict environment was demonstrated by the data of this research to be implicated in the existence and nature of this perennial conflict.

Concerning culture, cross classification of relevant variables affirmed that culture bears on the conflict in two sense, namely the tendency of Turkanas to essentialize Dassanechs and vice-versa, meaning the Turkana/Dassanech have certain attributes which make them to be what they are and not like anyone else. Essentializing the ethnic other is a recipe for inter-ethnic conflict. Dassanechs resent being called "Merillle" by Turkanas, and Turkanas resent being called "Buma" by Dassanechs. The other sense was culture as something which uses people rather than something which people use. Moranism and its behavioural expression in the form of aggression (raiding) against the ethnic other bespeaks culture using people. On the one hand, these communities hugely depend on pastoralism for their livelihood, and on the other hand, the conflict between them is inextricably linked as an effect with pastoralism. Consequently, this link between pastoralism and conflict contributes to the failure of peacebuilding strategies and interventions to diversify livelihood resilience away from pastoralism, thereby decreasing the frequency of occurrences of inter-communal attacks and counter-attacks in the form of revenge. This is a critically

important explanation for the continuation of the cycle of intercommunal violence**.**

The interplay of matters political and matters economic constitutes the bedrock of understanding the conflict in question. This study found that pursuits of political and economic interests bears on the Turkana-Dassanech conflict. The dynamics of the interests at national level have led to these communities receiving increasingly unequal shares of the rewards of national development praxis because it is skewed against the Turkana and Dassanech. The dynamics have resulted in marginalization of these ethnic communities. Specifically, by and large they live on the margins of the national society in that they are denied access to important positions and symbols of economic and political power within the society. They experience deprivation of resources (such as financial capital) and social network links to the centre of state power and legitimacy where policy decisions that affect them are made. Their localized inter-communal conflict is significantly due to this state of affairs. Quite a lot has been said and written in connection with guns (small arms) – how easy it is to access them, how/why to disarm these communities (Turkanas more so than Dassanechs), how their prevalence and use of them in most, if not all, inter-communal aggression (attacks/raids/revenge/stealing) lends credence to the notion of government failure to end the occurrence of incidents of localized inter-communal violence, and the like.

Respondents (n=300) denied that small arms fuel inter-ethnic conflict; they do not acquire small arms to fight the neighbouring ethnic other - Turkana/Dassanech. They stated categorically and clearly, that they have to possess fire arms for dual reasons, namely human security to secure their lives against attacks by the ethnic other; and to protect their livestock from getting raided by the ethnic other. They maintained that if the state fulfilled its primary responsibility to provide adequate institutional structures to ensure their security, they would then have no need to own guns to protect themselves and their means of livelihood**.**

Pastoralism necessarily entails possession of firearms on account of these two reasons. Surrendering the small arms to the government authority has failed because it is at once involuntary and acquiescence under conditions of unequal power. Since pastoralism entails possession of small arms, the only workable – and successfully so – strategy of disarming is for government to initiate development of livelihood projects that diversify means of survival away from pastoralism, thereby leading to atrophy of possession of firearms – rendering possession of them needless.

This study's last research question elicitated information and data on the issue of whether there is a partisan component in the roles of non-governmental organizations working among the Turkana and Dassanech communities. The organizations focus mostly on livelihood matters. Being partisan means engaging in advocacy activities in the interest of these communities by, for example, faulting the powers that be or the establishment and, at times, doing things that run counter to government policy practices, and the like. The works of non-governmental organizations in these communities complement what the government does. Indeed, in some areas locals know and can mention what these non-state actor (for example, the church) has done for them, but not what the government has done for them. Besides, results of data analysis have also indicated that non-government organizations do not take sides in the localized intercommunal conflicts, that is, they do not side with one against the other. The Catholic Church – by far the major non-state actor in terms of nurturing peaceful coexistence between Turkana and Dassanechs - does not discriminate between them. Thus, for example, its school at Todoyang (in Turkana land) in Kenya is attended by Turkanas as well as Dassanechs from the Ethiopian side of the Kenya-Ethiopia border. According to the data of this study - generated through the questionnaire, face-to-face interviews, group interviews (that is, focus group discussions) no non-governmental organizations, be it faith-based or non-faith-based, working in the northwestern Kenya—southwestern Ethiopia region on conflict/peace affairs was ordered to stop its work and leave the region. Non-governmental organizations do not need the

government, to work in this region, except for sanctioning and providing human security for them. However, the government needs or approves them to work in the region because they do some of what the government should, or would have to do, if they were not there. If there is a sense in which some aspects of their conflict/peace/livelihood work smacks of partisanship, it is tolerated or ignored because it neither harms conflict transformation and peacebuilding efforts nor undermines the legitimacy of state authority.

Conclusion.

The Turkana-Dassanech conflict has a long history because of its adaptive capacity. Its dimensions in the form of resource scarcity, contested ownership or control of territory, relative state weakness, cultural difference between antagonists, pursuits of political and economic interests, roles of non-governmental organizations, and proliferations of small arms overlap in terms of their dynamics, thereby seemingly prolonging the conflict, if not making it robust, rather than attenuating it. Today knowledge and understanding of the interplay of these dimensions is less than adequate. Developing institutional mechanisms in the cultural, economic and political domains of society will have the effects of enhancing knowledge and understanding of the essence and dynamics of these dimensions, thereby significantly attenuating the conflict.

Reference

Burton, J. W. (1991). Conflict resolution as political system. In V. D. Volkan, D. A. Julius, & J. V. Montville (Eds.), *The Psychodynamics of International Relations* (Vol. II, pp. 82-83). Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1991.