

## CONFLICT RESOLUTION AMONG PASTORAL COMMUNITIES IN WEST POKOT COUNTY, KENYA: A MISSING LINK

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### ABSTRACT

*Conflicts and conflict resolutions among pastoral communities are not new phenomena. Among the pastoral communities living in arid and semi arid environments of Kenya, conflicts over control of and access to natural resources are a common phenomenon. Despite the increase in peace building initiatives conflicts in these areas are far from ending resulting in conflict-torn pastoral regions. The current study investigated conflict and conflict resolution strategies in West Pokot County. The specific objectives of the study were to: (a) identify the sources of conflict among the pastoral communities in West Pokot County, (b) examine the conflict resolution initiatives in the county and (c) evaluate the effectiveness of peace building initiative in conflict resolution. The main method of data collection was scheduled interviews. The study established that the main source of conflicts was control over and access to natural resources particularly pasture and water and in fewer instances land (intra-conflicts) followed by livestock raids and politically initiated conflicts. Through peace building initiatives, decreased incidences of historical conflict between pastoral communities and the Pokots (living in West Pokot County) were established but not with conflicts associated with natural resources. Scarcity of pasture and water, which is a manifest of the effects of climate change, negates the attempts made at national and local levels to resolve conflicts. However, the aspect of climate change mitigation was absent in all peace building initiatives in the county. The study established a missing link in conflict resolution initiatives and therefore recommends that mitigation of climate change should be the focal point in addressing conflict in pastoral regions since natural resources, which pastoralists entirely depend on, are depleting at an alarming rate due to the changes in climatic patterns.*

**Keywords:** Conflict, climate change, natural resources, pastoralism, climate mitigation.

### INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a manifest in structural inequity and unequal distribution of power. It is a situation with at least two identifiable groups in conscious opposition to each other as they pursue incompatible goals. Conflicts are common phenomena in many regions of the world, especially in dry lands, that are endowed with scarce natural resources. Global environmental change coupled with population increases has led to unprecedented demand for resources. The consequences have been competition over control of and access to the meager resources which in turn trigger conflicts. Climate related environmental changes have been observed to be among the major causes of the conflicts (Mathew *et al.*, 2009; Sterzel *et al.*, 2012). Climate change in the Greater Horn of Africa (GHA) has been evidenced by increasing frequency of droughts from one in every six years to one in every three years. In Ethiopia, for example, drought frequency has increased from 6-8 years to the current 1-2 years (Meier *et al.*, 2007).

Conflicts among the pastoral communities are largely caused by competition over control of and access to natural resources particularly water and pasture. Other causes of conflicts include historical rivalry, deep-seated cultural values, land issues, political incitements, idleness amongst the youth and more recently proliferation of illicit arms (USAID, 2005). However, Mathew *et al.* (2009) observes that exploitation of natural resources and other

related environmental stresses are crucial in all phases of the conflicts, from outbreak and perpetuation of violence to undermining prospects for peace. They noted that at least 40% of the intrastate conflicts in the last sixty years are associated with natural resources. In some parts of Sudan, for instance, conflicts have intensified due to dwindling natural resources caused by severe droughts (United Nations Development Programme Sudan, 2010).

Although conflicts in Kenya are of many different kinds, Juma (2000) classifies them into four main categories: (a) conflicts among pastoral communities, (b) conflicts linked to presence of refugees, (c) conflicts between pastoralists and crop farming communities and (d) ethnic clashes. He observes that current environmental pressures have changed conflict dynamics. For example, the 1999-2001 drought that wiped out the Turkana community entire stock increased pressure on the Turkana to raid other communities in order to restock their lost herd. The year 2000 drought caused water deficits in ASAL districts of Kenya amounting to 23,022 m<sup>3</sup>/d in Mandera, 29,769 m<sup>3</sup>/d in Wajir, 25,529 m<sup>3</sup>/d in Garissa, 49,495 m<sup>3</sup>/d in Kitui, 17,916 m<sup>3</sup>/d in Tana River, 12,710 m<sup>3</sup>/d in Samburu, 35,816 m<sup>3</sup>/d in Turkana, 29,105 m<sup>3</sup>/d in West Pokot and 24,690 m<sup>3</sup>/d in Laikipia. This water shortage coupled with shortage of pasture sparked competition which led to conflicts between rival groups (UNEP/GoK, 2000). The drought of the year 2011 in the arid northern Kenya depleted pasture and dried water points in Moyale, triggering inter-clan attacks and counter-attacks where seven people were killed in Burji, Moyale town (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2011).

Peace building, which is defined as any activity undertaken with the purpose of preventing, alleviating, or resolving conflict, is a regular practice amongst the warring communities. Lind (2006) observes that donor agency activities particularly in pastoral areas of eastern Ethiopia, northern Kenya, southeastern Sudan and northern Uganda revolve around conflict reduction and peace building activities. At local levels, for instance, disputes over lost crops and access to water and pastoralists' routes is carried out by council of elders (United Nations Development Programme Sudan (2010). At national levels, various local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are involved in peace building. Such peace building initiative organization include: the Development Initiative Access Link (DIAL) Africa in Somalia (DIAL, 2012), the Greater Horn of Africa Initiative (GHAI) for the Greater Horn of Africa (GHA) (USAID/REDSO, 2003) and the Netherlands, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and UNDP, which launched the Reduction of Resource Based Conflicts project in 2004 in Sudan (United Nations Development Programme Sudan, 2010). Despite the efforts, conflicts reoccur in pastoral regions across the globe and worst still the frequency of conflicts seems to be increasing in frequency in the GHA. It is against this background that the current study sought to examine the missing link between peace building initiatives and continued conflicts among the pastoralists living West Pokot County.

### **Objectives**

The objectives of the study were to:

- a. Identify sources of conflicts among the pastoral communities in West Pokot County.
- b. Examine the peace building initiatives in the county.
- c. Evaluate the effectiveness of peace building initiative in conflict resolution

### **METHODOLOGY AND STUDY AREA**

Data for the study was obtained through structured interviews and personal observation. Interview schedules focused on causes of conflicts in West Pokot County, types of conflicts and peace building strategies. A total of 120 pastoralist respondents were randomly sampled and interviewed. West Pokot County lies between latitudes 10<sup>0</sup> 10'N and 30<sup>0</sup> 40'N and

longitudes  $34^{\circ} 50'E$  and  $35^{\circ} 50'E$  (Figure 1) and covers approximately 9,100 square kilometres. The county has two rainy seasons namely the "long rains" (March – June) and the "short rains" (September – November). The climate is semi arid to arid with annual rainfall ranging between totals range from 700 mm in the lowlands to 1600 mm in the highlands. Temperatures range from  $15^{\circ}$  to  $30^{\circ}$  C in the lowlands and to as low as  $9^{\circ}$  C in the highlands. The relatively rugged terrain characterized by hills, dry plains and rugged escarpments influences the climate of West Pokot with the lowlands experiencing arid climates and the highlands experiencing sub humid climates. Generally, 80% of the county is arid or semi-arid.

The county is inhabited primarily by the Pokots and has a population of 512,690 people with a density of 56 persons per square kilometre (Government of Kenya [GoK], 2009). Population distribution is uneven with high settlement densities on the highlands of Chepateria, Lelan and Kapenguria. About 60% of the population live in the lowlands such as Alale, Kacheliba, Chesegon and parts of Sigor division and practice nomadic pastoralism while the rest of the population are agro-pastoralists living in the highlands. The county, which typically a rangeland, is drained by Rivers Turkwel, Kerio and Nzoia. Rivers Turkwel and Kerio drain northwards into Lake Turkana while River Nzoia drains into the Lake Victoria in the south (Adan and Pkalya, 2005).

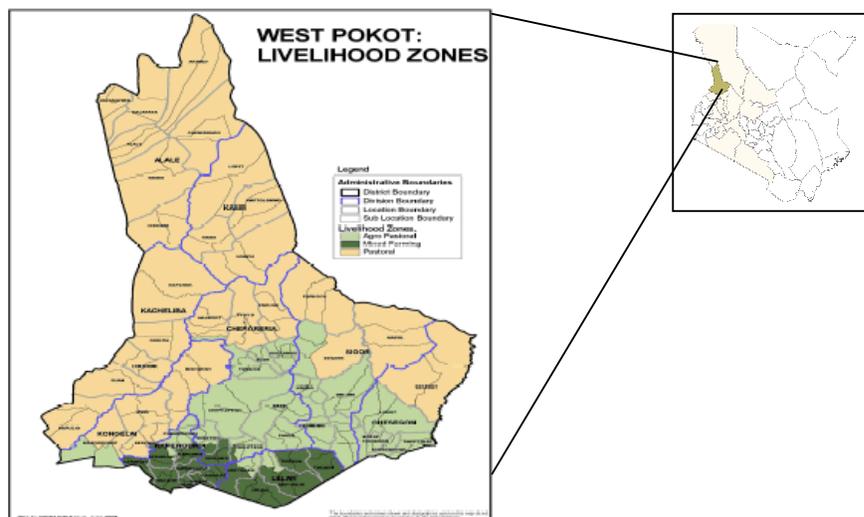


Figure 1. Location, size and livelihood zones of the West Pokot County

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Source of Conflicts

Conflicts in West Pokot County, like in many other pastoral regions, were both intra and inter community and nearly all revolved around control over and access to natural resources particularly water and pasture. Other sources of conflicts were as a result of livestock raids, historical rivalry and politically instigated conflicts. Among the Pokot in the county, intra-community conflicts were largely as a result of land disputes. Land ownership in West Pokot County is both communal and freehold. Most of the communal lands, where pastoralism predominates, are found in the lowlands while freehold land ownership is largely in the highlands where land is arable. The need to access the available land resources, during the dry spell, triggered conflicts between community members living on the lowlands of Sigor,

Cheptulel, Kacheliba and Chepkopigh and on the highlands of Chepateria, Lelan and Kapenguria. The conflicts were either as a result of unclear land boundaries or where one clan claimed ownership of land that belonged to the other. Loss of livelihood sources and the search of alternative sources during droughts forced the affected community members living in lowlands to move to the highlands claiming ownership of the arable land triggering conflicts. Such conflicts were short-term existing only during the dry spell.

Inter-community conflicts were the most common types of conflict in the county. These conflicts were caused by historical rivalry, cattle rustling and competition for water and pasture. Conflicts as a result of historical rivalry existed between the Pokot and members of other pastoral communities such as the Turkana, Sabaot, Samburu and Marakwet (from Kenya) and Sabinu and Karamajong (from Uganda). The study established that such conflicts had nevertheless reduced after the 1998 peace talk that was led by the then president of the Republic of Kenya. For instance, conflicts between the Marakwet and the Pokot living in Lelan highlands and Cheptulel lowlands stopped completely in 1998 and 2002 respectively. However, historical rivalry still existed with the Turkana community. This was attributed to the fact that the Pokot and the Turkana share the longest boundary and in addition each community regarded the other as inferior.

Cattle rustling remained to be a dominant cause of conflicts among the Pokot and other pastoral community members. Cattle rustling in West Pokot County involved the Turkana, Sabaot, Samburu, Marakwet, Sabinu and Karamajong communities. The study established that cattle rustling was a way of life for the pastoralists where pastoral communities organized raids which were executed by the morans, as a symbol of dominance. These raids were planned, guided and moderated by the community elders. After the raid, retaliatory attacks were organized by the rival community elders at the most appropriate time and ensured no fatalities occurred. However, contemporary raids have become more frequent and fatal. This was attributed to increase in extreme climatic events, particularly droughts and proliferation of small arms respectively. This observation concurs with Meier et al. (2007) who notes that raiding, which serves to rebuild the lost herds through droughts, occur more frequently as climate changes since they are largely tied to climatic conditions. West Pokot County being semi arid to arid is characterized by scarcity of water and pasture resources with worsening conditions as drought frequency and severity increases (Plate 1). As the county gets drier, competition for water and pasture resources and replacement of livestock lost during droughts increases.



**Plate 1. Sheep grazing in drought stricken West Pokot County**

However, it should be noted that livestock raids and droughts existed in an indirect relationship. Livestock raids during droughts were minimal due to poor livestock body conditions and scarcity of pasture. Raiding occurred during wet season when water and pasture was available for livestock. This ensured that livestock stolen had enough pasture and would reproduce to replace the lost herd. Nevertheless, raids were carried out in order to replace the herd lost due to weather-related disasters such as droughts, floods or diseases. After the raid, retaliatory attacks followed almost immediately. For example, the 16 November 1995 raid by the Pokot against the Turkana, which led to a loss of 2,000 goats and one herdsman, was followed by a retaliatory attack on 27 December 1995 by the Turkana pastoralists. This retaliatory attack led to loss of three people and 4,000 cattle (Nangulu, 2001).

The study established that most of the dry season grazing areas and water points are mostly found in disputed lands. Reliable dry season pasture and water points are found in areas such as Lorengippi hills, Lokori and Kainuki along the borders of Turkana and West Pokot Counties, in the Kerio Valley along the border of Pokot and Marakwet Counties and in lower part of Sigor and Turkwell bordering Turkana and along the Kenya-Uganda border respectively. Access to these resources during dry seasons sparked clashes between the Pokot, Turkana and Marakwet communities. Similar findings have been found in Tana River County by Nembrini, et al. (2005) who asserts that pastoral communities have been fighting for the last 10 years over water and pasture. During the 2001-2002 droughts, for example, the Orma and Wardei pastoralists accused the Pokomo of denying them access to water points and grazing fields resulting in conflicts which claimed over 100 lives. According to USAID (2005), conflicts between the Turkana, Pokot and Sabinu communities were typically over access and utilization of the scarce natural resources.

### **Climate and Conflicts**

Climate and the associated environmental disasters, such as droughts and floods, induce forced migrations and competition over natural resources among the pastoral communities with potential negative consequences for political stability and conflict resolution (Tedesse, 2010). In the arid northern Kenya, the severe droughts that used to occur every ten years now occur every five years or less (Oxfam, 2011). Like in other parts of Kenya, climate change in West Pokot County is evident through frequent occurrence of droughts and flash floods. Today, occurrence of droughts in West Pokot County is a norm rather than an exception with droughts occurring almost every year. For instance, in the last one decade droughts occurred in 1999-2001, 2002, 2003, 2004-2006, 2007 and 2008-2011. The consequence has been increased poverty levels. By 2006 poverty levels in West pokot County stood at 69.4% (<http://kenya.usaid.gov/sites/default/>

[files/profiles/WestPokotCounty23Jan2012.pdf](http://kenya.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/profiles/WestPokotCounty23Jan2012.pdf)). After occurrence of a drought, UNEP and GoK (2000) observes that it takes about four years to recover from a third drop in cattle numbers and eleven years from a two-third drop. For sheep and goats (shoats), it takes one and a half years and three years respectively for the same figures. Deprivation resulting from high poverty levels and the endless struggle for basic needs prompted pastoralists into conflicts particularly because of competition over resources and cattle rustling in order to replace the lost herd (Kona, 2004). Meier et al. (2007) and Ambeje (2004) notes that all conflicts in pastoral areas ultimately revolve around scarcity of resources. For instance, competition for water and pasture at Nadome, Lomelo and Napeitum in Turkana during the 1995 drought degenerated into an inter-ethnic warfare between the Turkana and the Pokot. During the conflict, about 44 people were killed and 12,000 animals stolen (Nangulu, 2001).

The study established that incidences of conflicts over natural resources have been rising between the Pokot and other pastoral communities as prolonged droughts impact negatively on the pastoral livelihood systems. Water and pasture dried up forcing pastoralists to move to areas around Mt Elgon and Uganda. During the 2004 drought, for example, conflict flared up between the Pokot and the Sabei from Uganda as they scrambled for pasture and water around Mt. Elgon region and in Kapchorwa and Nakapiripit Districts in Uganda leading to deaths of 10 people. During the 2007 drought, the search for pasture forced the Pokot pastoralists to move to Mt. Kadama in the Pokot-Uganda border triggering conflicts with the Karamajong. Other water and pasture-related conflicts in the county occurred in 2009, 2011 and in early 2012. Like in West Pokot County, Pleijel et al. (2005) asserts that the main cause of conflicts between tribes in Darfur in Sudan is water, pasture and other natural resources. They observe that changes in rainfall patterns in the last 20 years have led to decline in water resources triggering water conflicts.

Contrary to conflict-torn lowland areas of West Pokot County, in the wet highland areas of the county, conflicts were rare. Respondents attributed peace and stability in these areas to food security and stable sources of livelihoods - mixed farming. For instance the peaceful coexistence between the Pokot and the Luhya communities living at the border between Transzoia and West Pokot counties (Murkwijit area) was attributed to suitable climate for agriculture. The agro-pastoralist who practiced small-scale irrigation in lowland areas such as the Wei wei irrigation scheme did not engage in conflicts. The understanding that conflicts lead to human displacements, loss of property and increased poverty levels made the inhabitants in these areas to refrain from both intra and inter-community conflicts. The study established that with adequate and reliable rainfall, therefore, conflicts in the county and other pastoral regions can be eradicated. This is because adequate and reliable rainfall leads to availability of water and pasture, which minimizes competition over resources, increases food security and enhances livelihood sources with an overall reduction in poverty levels.

### **Peace Building Initiatives**

Conflicts in West Pokot County, like in other pastoral areas, have not gone unchecked. Numerous initiatives have been put in place in order to prevent, alleviate or resolve conflicts. Peace building in the county consisted of both peace negotiations conducted by the government, political leaders, and sometimes by external parties such as the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and through grass-roots initiatives. As a result of numerous peace building initiatives, the county has experienced an overall reduction in the number of conflicts save for conflicts related to competition over natural resources. Conflicts arising from historical rivalry and socio-cultural practices had greatly reduced. On contrary, conflicts over control of and access to water and pasture in the county and in the neighbouring counties still persisted and were associated with extreme climatic events.

Grass-root peace building initiative emerged out of despair and frustration caused by conflicts. The most frequently used grass-root peace building strategy was the use of council of elders (referred to as *Poy* in Pokot language) (Plate 2). Community elders, from the conflicting communities made treaties on peace keeping. This strategy involved slaughtering of a goat and the use of goat blood for cleansing. Sharing a meal among the warring communities' elders was sign of peaceful coexistence. However, this strategy largely dealt with the situation at hand and thus served for specific warring situations. The study established that even after brokering of peace through the council of elders, sometimes conflicts flared up depending on the intensity of the socio-economic hardship the communities were undergoing. For instance, if livestock loss continued unabated due to climate vagaries, raiding persisted.



**Plate 2. A peace meeting between the Pokot and the Samburu. An elder addressing morans in West Pokot County**

Another grass root peace building initiative in West Pokot County was Tegla Lorupe Peace Race Foundation which was founded in 2003 by the renowned world athlete Tegla Lorupe, a member of Pokot community. This peace initiative engaged in sporting activities between the rival communities and educating people on the importance of peaceful coexistence. The rival communities, through the help of the foundation, organize annual cultural fashion shows and peace races which bring together the Pokot, Turkana, Samburu, Sabaot, Sabinu and Karamajong (Plate 3). The foundation holds peace races annually in West Pokot, Kapenguria, Tana River and Moroto in Uganda. Some of the recent major events include: the Kapenguria peace race (14<sup>th</sup> Nov, 2009), the Great Turkwel peace and beauty, which combined both cultural beauty show and 10 kilometre race (25<sup>th</sup> Sept, 2010) and the Moroto peace race in Uganda (27<sup>th</sup> -28<sup>th</sup> May, 2011). These peace races were open to all members of the rival pastoral communities.



**Plate 3. Peace race and cultural beauty show aimed at bringing conflicting communities together (source: Kengen, 2011)**

Formal peace building initiatives in West Pokot County involved the government and the international NGOs. The Kenya government had in several occasions initiated peace building process through disarmament programmes in 2006, 2009-2010, establishing the Nasolot game reserves in 1979 to act as a boundary between the rival Pokot and Turkana communities and enhancing security through sending soldiers to areas affected by conflicts and establishment of more police post in remote areas. For instance, after the November 1995 raids and counter raids between the Pokot and the Turkana, the government deployed security forces, the GSU, regular Kenya Police and Administrative Police to contain the situation. In addition, the Kenya government attempted to disarm the Turkana, Pokot and Marakwet (Nangulu, 2001).

The World Vision, Kenya (WVK) and the Kenya Red Cross Society (KRCS) had established peace building initiatives in the County. For instance, the World Vision peace initiative began its operations in 1997 with an aim of educating the rival communities on the advantages of peaceful coexistence, provide formal education, providing water through drilling boreholes and water piping from highlands to lowlands and also provided drought resilient Sahiwal cattle breed. For instance, in 2010 the WVK launched a water project that provided safe water to more than 68,000 people in Chepareria, West Pokot Kenya. The major contribution of the Kenya Red cross was the distribution of food and non-food items to the affected communities. Provision of food, led to decline in the rates and levels of conflicts. The IOM, through the Japan funded project, focused on conflict prevention, protection of victims of conflicts, building and strengthening policies that promote peaceful coexistence and promote partnerships with formal and grass root structures like peace committees in West Pokot County (IOM, 2011).

Pokot Education and Development Programme (PEDP) undertook various community development initiatives that largely dealt with conflict resolution among other issues. PEDP organized inter-community peace dialogue between the warring communities. For example, PEDP organized a Pokot – Marakwet peace dialogue on March 28<sup>th</sup> 2003 (ITDG Practical Action, 2003). Other NGOs that involved in conflict resolution were Daima Initiative for Peace and Development (DiPaP) and women peace crusader. The focus of these NGOs was basically participatory collective approach in the attainment of peace and non-violent coexistence.

### **The Missing Link**

Despite much effort by government and non-governmental bodies to broker peace amongst the pastoralists, Kona (2004) acknowledges that breaking the vicious cycle of conflicts in pastoral communities remains a challenge to most peace building initiatives. Nangulu (2001) observes that cattle raiding still remain a major challenge among the Pokot, despite the Kenya government's efforts to stop it. Persistent conflicts in the last two decades in West Pokot County are as a result of dwindling pastoral economy as water and pasture resources become scarce with climate change. Increased competition over the scarce water and pastures culminates into conflicts. this observation confirms Huho et al. (2009) and Huho and Ngaira (2012) assertion that the main threat to pastoral economy in the arid regions of northern Kenya has been scarcity of water and pasture due to increasing drought frequency and persistence caused by climate change.

However, most peace building initiatives concentrate on the context of the conflict rather than the root causes of the conflict resulting in short-term existence of peace. Juma (2000) states that lasting peace among the warring communities can only be achieved by addressing the root cause of the conflict. The study established that peace can be achieved if the pastoralists

engage in profitable ventures such as agriculture which assures them sustainable livelihood source, food security and reduced poverty levels. This was evidenced by peaceful coexistence in high agricultural potential areas and irrigated lowlands. However, irrigation remained questionable whether it was a permanent solution to sustainable livelihood source especially with the potential depletion of the already low aquifers water levels as climate changes.

Thus, to have long-lasting peace among the pastoral communities activities geared towards mitigation of climate change should be the focal point. This is because adequate and reliable rainfall will not only enhance food security and reliable source of livelihoods but also reduce competition for natural resources. This assertion agrees with Juma (2000) observation who argues that the process of peace building involves changing the socio-economic circumstances of the conflicting communities rather than taming and stopping the warriors. However, analysis of activities of the peace building initiatives in West Pokot County revealed that long-term solution for conflicts caused by climate vagaries were not adequately addressed. Most of the peace initiatives in the county had their focus geared towards averting conflict situations at hand rather than addressing the root cause of the conflicts. Moreover, the National Policy on Conflict Transformation and Peace-Building has its overall objective as to enhance the ability of the government of Kenya to respond to internal conflicts by establishing a comprehensive and proactive national approach. However, none of its specific objectives addresses environmental issues particularly on mitigation of climate change (Centre for Minority Rights Development [CEMIRIDE] & USAID, 2006). Though WVK acknowledges that long-term peace can only be obtained through enhancing sustainable livelihoods sources, it advocated for shifting from pastoralism to more viable sources (Weiss, 2004). Thus, mitigation of climate change as a strategy to avert future conflicts over natural resources was given least priority. Conflict resolution in pastoral regions revolves around favourable climatic conditions. Therefore, all peace building initiatives must engage in climate mitigation measures which have been a missing link in the efforts to curb conflicts.

## CONCLUSION

Conflicts among the pastoralists in West Pokot County largely revolved around competition over control of and access to pasture and water resources emanating from extreme climatic events. Conflicts were common in lowlands areas due shortage of water and pasture, food insecurity and high poverty levels caused by prolonged dry periods. The wet highlands provided sustainable livelihood source and therefore were more peaceful. The study concluded that activities revolving around mitigation of climate change will play a major role in long-term conflict resolution. This is because adequate and reliable rainfall ensures secure livelihood source, food security and overall reduction in poverty levels which actually acts as catalyst for conflict among pastoral communities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that peace building initiatives should focus on long-term conflict resolution strategies that will ensure reduced levels of poverty. This can be achieved through focusing on the following activities aimed at mitigating climate change.

1. Planting trees that adapts well to harsh climatic conditions. Trees will act as sinks for carbon dioxide which is one of the greenhouse gases. Greenhouse gases prevent infrared radiation from escaping leading to increase in earth's surface temperature.
2. Reducing number of livestock per household. Livestock produce methane which is a greenhouse gas. The more the number of livestock the higher the amount of methane produces, thus reduction in livestock number will act to reduce the amount methane

emitted in the atmosphere. In addition, overgrazing caused by large livestock herds acts a positive feedback mechanism to climate change.

3. Encouraging in organic irrigation agriculture. In areas where irrigation inorganic agriculture should be encourage to reduce the usage of fertilizers. Nitrogenous fertilizers lead to increase in the amount of nitrous oxides which is a greenhouse gas.

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