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Between a rock and hard place: Armed Violence in African Pastoral Communities¹



United Nations
Development Programme

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Cover photo:
UN Photo/Tim McKulka Members of the
Ambororo nomadic community in Sudan

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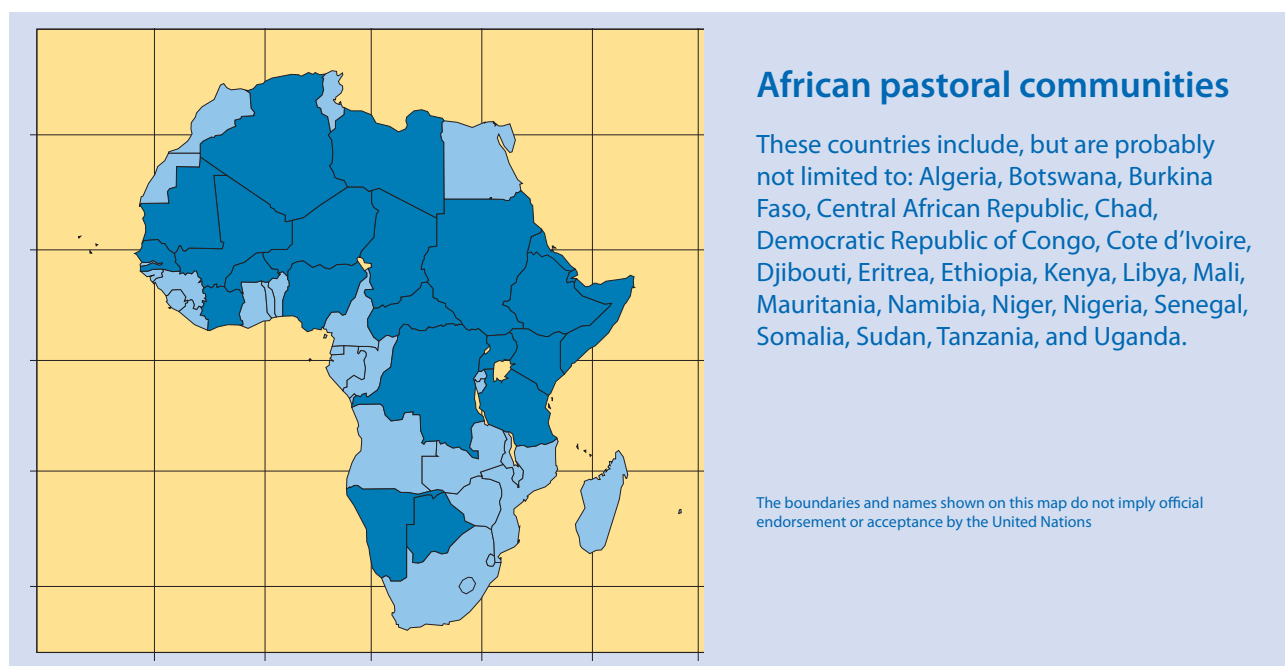


Introduction

Pastoral communities inhabit over 21 countries on the African continent, ranging from the Sahelian West, the rangelands of Eastern Africa and the Horn, to the nomadic populations of Southern Africa. They are concentrated in some of the most arid regions of the continent, which necessitate semi- or wholly-nomadic livestock grazing. Many of these communities are affected by armed violence, with East Africa and the Horn, and the Sahel region featuring sustained levels of inter-pastoral armed violence with associated lawlessness.

Eastern Africa has numerous pastoral groups in a broad geographical band that stretches from the Kenya-Somalia border northwards into Ethiopia; and northwest to encompass regions of Uganda, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic (CAR). These regions have suffered large-scale intra-state wars that have supplied pastoral groups with modern weaponry, resulting in protracted conflicts with numerous neighbours. The Toposa of Southern Sudan, for instance are, at various times, in conflict with one or a number of neighbouring groups including the Turkana, Dassenach, Didinga, Dinka, and some of the Karimojong sub-clans.² In the Sahel region, pastoral conflicts have extended from the western states of Senegal and Mauritania to the Chad-CAR-Sudan border triangle in the east. Population shifts to the south prompted, primarily by climactic change, have given rise to conflicts over resources and land tenure, particularly in states such as Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Nigeria.³ While less attention has been paid to pastoral communities to the south, such as in the drylands of Namibia and Botswana, similar factors have precipitated conflict, and therefore should not be ignored.⁴

African pastoral communities have become synonymous with high levels of armed violence and severe under-development. Governments and international agencies alike often frame pastoralism as a thorn in the side of state-led development and violence reduction policies. There are a number of reasons for this: the fact that many pastoral communities function outside of state administrative and security frameworks; the view that the pastoral lifestyle is fundamentally incompatible with the state; malfunctioning conflict mediation systems within pastoral communities; and the apparent contradiction of the pastoral mode of production to agrarian economies.



- 1 Written by: James Bevan, Researcher, Small Arms Survey, Geneva. Editorial support: Rob Muggah, Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development; Adèle Kirsten.
- 2 Bevan, J. 2007. 'Fear and loathing in Karamoja: An assessment of armed violence and the failure of disarmament in Uganda's most deprived region.' Small Arms Survey Working Paper. Geneva: Small Arms Survey Occasional Paper.
- 3 Bassett, T. 1988. 'The Political Ecology of Peasant-Herder Conflicts in the Northern Ivory Coast.' *Annals of the Association of American geographers*. Volume 78. Number 3. pp: 453-472.
- 4 Blench, R. 2001 'You can't go home again: Pastoralism in the new millennium.' London. ODI.

Dimensions of the Problem

Pastoralism is the finely-honed, symbiotic relationship between local ecology, domesticated livestock and people, in resource-scarce regions – often at the threshold of human survival.⁵ Contrary to common assumptions, pastoralism contributes significantly to the economies of many states and is the primary mode of production on one quarter of the world's land area, providing around 10 percent of global meat production and supporting around 200 million households.⁶

Many of the world's pastoral communities have a long history of conflict among themselves. These conflicts extend to neighbouring sedentary communities and also with the state. The level of violence used varies with only a small number of these conflicts erupting into armed violence.⁷ But those that do – and notably in the African context – have proved devastating to the socio-economic and development trajectories of entire regions.

The overriding factor that makes pastoral communities prone to conflict (whether violent or otherwise) is their ambiguous relationship with the state and the majority sedentary populations that reside within them. Historically, pastoralism adapted to sparsely-populated, arid regions where seasonal, migratory grazing – or transhumance – maximised nutritional gain.⁸ As a result, pastoral communities emerged at the periphery of the more populated regions that would later become trading and administrative centres and, later still, the nuclei of states.

In many regions, the pastoral periphery is in a state of flux. Climactic changes have led to desertification and narrowed the belts of pasture upon which the pastoralist mode of production depends, drastically reducing access to rangeland. At the same time, growing sedentary populations, and resulting demand for arable land, have decreased the relative opportunity cost of farming in arid regions. Assisted by government and internationally-sponsored irrigation schemes and changes in land use, sedentary 'encroachment' has further diminished the range of pastoral transhumance.

Many pastoral regions also comprise large territories within states. The limited presence of state apparatus, combined with inadequate communications infrastructure, and a laissez faire approach to managing peripheral regions, means that government's ability to monitor, mediate and police disputes in these areas is curtailed. In addition, increasing competition over scarce resources, and growing urban populations adjacent to pastoral regions, has resulted in increases in economically-motivated crime, such as 'commercialized' livestock raiding. This has contributed to a climate of 'lawlessness' – fuelling a self-sustaining dynamic where minimal socio-economic investment allows crime and violence to flourish, which further deters investment of all kinds.

A typology of violence in pastoral communities

Pastoral people operate within three major systems: the natural resource system; the resource users system; and the larger geo-political system. Changes in any one system impacts on their capacity to adapt to social, political and environmental shocks.⁹ Herein lie some of the factors that contribute to the growing violent conflict in pastoral communities, which are elucidated in more detail below.

Augmenting and compensatory raiding

In pastoral communities across Africa, raids undertaken to increase stocks and compensate thefts have been normalised and accepted as part of traditional intra-pastoral relations. In many cases, raids and counter-raids are (and traditionally have been) accompanied by high levels of armed violence. Raiding is one of the key features of pastoral conflict, but one that cannot operate as it has in the past within the state system, particularly with the advent of modern small arms.

5 Pratt, D.J., Le Gall, F. and de Haan, C. 1997. 'Investing in Pastoralism Sustainable Natural Resource use in Arid Africa and the Middle East.' World Bank Technical Paper. No. 365. Washington D.C.: World Bank.

6 UN Food and Agricultural Organization. 2001. 'Pastoralism in the new millennium.' Animal production and health paper. Number 150. Rome: FAO.

7 There is some consensus that people have been prompted into the pastoral mode of production by opportunity, rather than impelled by scarcity and competition. One of the most recent examples of this is the Saraguro people of Ecuador who, during the early 20th century, shifted from agro-pastoralism to take advantage of economic benefits, in what has been described as a relatively smooth transition. See Stewart et al. 1976. Transhumance in the Central Andes. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. Volume 66. Number 3. September. pp. 377-397.

8 Stewart et al. 1976.

9 Pratt et al. 1997.

Some argue that the proliferation of modern weaponry means that today's raiding has more impact in terms of death and injury than in the past.¹⁰ For example, an incursion into Kenya by the Karimojong of Uganda in 2000, demonstrates the escalating nature of armed violence, when a series of raids and counter-raids culminated in an attack that left 60 Kenyan Pokot dead (including 11 children and 16 women) and resulted in the theft of around 5,000 heads of cattle.¹¹

Commercialized raiding

One modern dimension of pastoral conflict is the emergence of commercialized raiding which is facilitated by improved access to markets, brought about by the growth of urban populations and infrastructure close to pastoral regions. Urban centres provide a market (hungry people) as well an opportunity (butchery and meat processing facilities) that formerly did not exist.

In contrast to augmenting and compensatory raiding, this form of theft is undertaken with the explicit intention of selling livestock for immediate profit – and usually results in the slaughter of the animals. In the Karamoja region of Uganda, for example, groups of warriors – many of whom have lost their herds to raiding – have been paid by local businessmen to raid cattle which are then sold for hard currency or taken directly to meat processing facilities.¹²

Contact with sedentary populations

The tension between migratory populations and proximate sedentary communities is well documented. As early as the 15th century, the historian Ibn Khaldun wrote of conflicts between nomadic populations in North Africa and the peoples within emerging states.¹³ Whilst it is important to note that pastoral populations often exist peacefully with sedentary communities, competition over land and resources has created tensions that, in some contexts, have escalated into armed violence. These conflicts tend to occur either on the fringes of pastoral regions, where transhumance and agriculture co-exist; or where pastoral groups have encroached onto land populated by sedentary farmers due to seasonal or climactic factors.

One of the primary causes of conflict appears to be the incompatibility of grazing and farming in the same space. Livestock can cause considerable damage to crops, leading to disputes. One assessment in Niger, for instance, attributed over 90 percent of pastoral-sedentary conflicts to damage caused to crops.¹⁴ In 1991, for instance, 114 people were killed in fighting between farmers and nomads in Niger's Guidan Roumji Region.¹⁵ The presence of pastoral groups, in search of land and water in traditionally sedentary regions of northern Côte d'Ivoire, has also led to violent disputes in which numerous people have been killed and injured.¹⁶

Disputes over land tenure and displacement

As populations in many developing countries expand, peripheral regions offer an increasingly attractive – although often unviable – means of increasing food production. Despite the fact that most pastoral rangeland is unsuitable for large-scale agriculture, governments and regional authorities have often encouraged sedentary farming, thereby constraining traditional pastoral modes of existence and displacing pastoral groups. This is compounded by a tendency to view pastoral regions as both uninhabited and under-productive.

In addition, there has been considerable pressure to develop pasture into arable land or terrain for market-oriented cattle herding.¹⁷ In Kenya, for instance, a policy of sub-dividing rangeland into group ranches, not only forced the pastoral Maasai, Boran and Rendille into dryer regions, but arguably proved less

10 Mirzeler, M. and Crawford Young. 2000. 'Pastoral Politics in the Northeast Periphery in Uganda: AK-47 as Change Agent.' *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. Volume 38. Number 3. pp: 407-429.

11 Mkutu, K. 2006. 'Small Arms and Light weapons Among Pastoralist Groups in the Kenya-Uganda Border Area.' *African Affairs*. Volume 106/422. p. 47.

12 Another example is the agro-pastoral Kuria, which straddle the border between Kenya and Tanzania and raid to supply butchers in Tanzania and Kenya. Fleisher, Michael. 2000. 'Kuria Cattle Raiding: Capitalist Transformation, Commoditization, and Crime Formation among an East African Agro-Pastoral People.' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. Volume 42. Number 4. October. pp. 745-769.

13 trans. Rosenthal 1967 in Blench, 2001, p. 15.

14 Mensour, E. 2005. 'La Prévention et la gestion des conflits agriculteurs/éleveurs dans les arrondissements de Guidan Roumji et Dakoro au Niger : Les actions menées par le Buco à travers la mise en œuvre du PASEL.' Niamey: PASEL, pp. 7-8.

15 Mensour, E. 2005, p. 2.

16 Quattara, Aly and Michée Boko. 2007. 'Cote d'Ivoire: Désertification, source de conflits mortels entre éleveurs et agriculteurs.' *Inter Press Service News Agency*. 29 July. http://www.ipsinternational.org/fr/_note.asp?idnews=3741

17 Mwaikusa, J.T. 1993. 'Community Rights and Land Use Policies in Tanzania: The Case of Pastoral Communities.' *Journal of African Law*. Volume 37. Number 2. pp. 144-163.

productive than pastoralism.¹⁸ The proliferation of policies of this kind suggest that decision-makers, when forced to choose between the concerns of pastoral communities and farming or market-oriented cattle production, tend to side with sedentary populations.¹⁹ There are a number of reasons for this, including: the preponderance of agriculture in most developing nations; the very real need to feed populations; and the stronger role of agriculturalists in the state political sphere.

Banditry and predation

The structure of pastoral communities, combined with often-poor state security services in the periphery, facilitates armed criminal activity. In addition, the growing proximity of pastoral communities and urban populations and the consequent rise in lootable commodities, has contributed to the rise in violent crime. This is evident in populations in Turkana District, northern Kenya and the Karamoja region of north-eastern Uganda.²⁰ For example, there is evidence to suggest that a number of pastoral warriors have become 'guns for hire,' with local elites exploiting the poverty of warriors by paying them to carry out elimination killings against political or social rivals, or engage in armed robbery.

Impact of Armed Violence

The peripheral location of pastoral communities makes it difficult to collect information on the distribution and impact of armed violence. In addition, transhumance, minimal monitoring by state security forces, and the near-absence of news media, contributes to the lack of information. It is nevertheless clear that the spatial distribution of armed violence in some pastoral regions is near total. Moreover, its impact, measured in death and injury, is probably sufficient for some classification systems²¹ to ascribe a state of war to the communities concerned.

Supply of arms and pastoral politicization

The proliferation of modern automatic weapons is well documented as having had a negative effect on the scale and impact of armed violence in pastoral communities.²² In Karamoja, for instance, almost 90 percent of attacks are perpetrated with small arms.²³ The peripheral status of and inadequate security provision for pastoral regions means people can acquire arms and ammunition with relative ease, many of which are weapons recycled from the wars in the region.²⁴ In addition, porous borders facilitate the illicit trade in weapons. However, the impact of the illicit trade is sometimes overplayed, in contrast to the role that states have played in supplying pastoral groups with weaponry, often because of their strategic location. These regions tend to be viewed by governments as potential weak points to territorial integrity.

In Karamoja, for instance, almost 90 percent of attacks are perpetrated with small arms.

Government-sponsored armament has occurred for two reasons – as a defensive measure against foreign incursion and as a means to destabilize opposing groups. For instance, the Ethiopian government armed the Dassenach with Kalashnikov-pattern assault rifles in the 1990s, ostensibly for self-protection against Kenyan and Sudanese pastoral groups, and as a buffer force against possible incursion by neighbouring states. In other cases, state governments have armed pastoral groups to hinder the development of opposition forces, as seen in Sudan.²⁵

18 Fratkin, E. 2001. 'East African Pastoralism in Transition: Maasai, Boran and Rendille Cases.' *African Studies Review*. Volume 44. Number 3. pp 1-25.

19 This is despite the fact that pastoralism is increasingly viewed as one of the most efficient and sustainable dryland modes of production. Kimani, Kamau and John Pickard. 1998. 'Recent Trends and Implications of Group Ranch Sub-Division and Fragmentation in Kajiado District, Kenya.' *The Geographical Journal*. Volume 164. Number 2. July. pp. 202-213.

20 Numerous field visits in Karamoja & Turkana District, 2005-7. James Bevan, Small Arms Survey.

21 The 1,000 battle deaths annually criteria would easily encapsulate pastoral conflicts in East Africa and, in the 1990s, the Sahel region. See Correlates of War Project, University of Michigan. 2006. 'Correlates of War' Project Website. University of Michigan: Department of Political Science. <<http://correlatesofwar.org/>>

22 Mkutu, 2006; Mirzeler and Young, 2000.

23 Bevan, J. 2007.

24 Bevan and Dreyfus, 2007.

25 Mburu, N. 2003. 'Delimitation of the elastic Elemi Triangle: Pastoral Conflicts and Official Indifference in the Horn of Africa. *African Studies Quarterly*. Volume 6 Number 4. p. 30.

Death and injury

Existing mortality and morbidity data suggests that pastoral communities have lost large sections of their populations to armed violence. In Karamoja, for instance, research shows that as many as 25 per cent of households surveyed had suffered death or injury to a family member in the 6 months prior to the study.²⁶ Although there is an absence of systematic monitoring mechanisms, studies show that armed violence-related mortality varies considerably for different pastoral groups.²⁷

Table 1 Impact of pastoral violence in the Ethiopian, Kenyan, and Ugandan border regions (May-August 2006)

Country	No. Incidents	No. Deaths	% Cross-border incidents
Ethiopia	16	21	87%
Kenya	11	31	26%
Uganda	117	147	5%

Sources: The Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN)

Secondary impacts of armed violence are less easy to quantify, making it difficult to generalise. However, some impacts are relevant to most pastoral communities, including: the impairment of the development of government administration, infrastructure and commerce, which includes reduced mobility of security forces and police to respond to violence; increases in the cost of transport; and the restricted access of civil society groups that engage in conflict mediation activities.²⁸ Finally, armed violence also has a constraining influence on the resource allocations that are at the root of many of Africa's pastoral conflicts.

Overview of International and Regional Agreements

There are several international and regional instruments on small arms control such as the UN Programme of Action; the ECOWAS Convention; the Nairobi Declaration and the SADC Protocol – all of which emphasise improving national controls over small arms as a prerequisite to stemming illicit cross-border proliferation. Although some of these agreements have resulted in increased information sharing and regional co-operation as well as the strengthening of national firearms control regimes, they appear to have had little impact to date on reducing the movement of weapons into pastoral regions.

However, an important regional initiative is underway to address a specific facet of pastoral violence, namely cattle rustling. The Eastern Africa Police Chiefs Co-operation Organisation (EAPCCO) initiative entitled *Protocol on the Prevention, Combating and Eradication of Cattle Rustling in Eastern Africa*,²⁹ aims to comprehensively address cattle rustling in order to promote peace, human security and development in the region. This includes combined border operations; public education and awareness programmes which encourage respect for each other's livelihoods; and development initiatives such as improvement of infrastructure and provision of water and pastoral lands. States also recognise that cattle rustling cannot be addressed from an enforcement perspective only and that community-based conflict resolution approaches need to be adopted, involving a range of stakeholders such as civic, community and traditional leaders.

It is clear that conventional interventions that are largely coercive, such as forcible disarmament, or that deal with the symptom rather than addressing their causes (such as monitoring and containing possible escalations in hostilities), have not produced the desired results, and may even have aggravated the problem.

²⁶ Bevan, J. 2007.

²⁷ IGAD's CEWARN is one attempt to provide early warning on cross-border pastoral conflicts in Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda. However, coverage is incomplete and the compilation of reports is slow.

²⁸ Field research conducted by James Bevan for the Small Arms Survey. Northern Kenya, 2006-2007.

²⁹ Stott, N. 2006. Trip Report on EAPCCO meeting of 6 June. Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria.

Prospects for Armed Violence Reduction

Measures to reduce armed violence have failed in most African pastoral contexts. Governments and international agencies have not developed appropriate policy responses and have tended to frame the issue in either overly simplistic or overly complex terms. The dominant response has been implementing disarmament programmes and replacing pastoralism with sedentary modes of production.

Disarmament

The use of small arms in pastoral conflict has led policy-makers to focus on weapons as the primary source of violent conflict rather than as a symptom of some of the deeper social, political and economic factors discussed earlier. Consequently, state interventions have tended to focus primarily on disarmament, and have failed to adopt a holistic approach of including demand-reduction strategies, effective policing, and comprehensive supply-side measures to stem the movement of weapons into these communities.

This suggests a failure on the part of states to recognize that arms acquisition by pastoral communities is as much a response to threats, as it is an attempt to gain offensive capability – in effect a misdiagnosis in which symptom is framed as cause. Communities have been unwilling to disarm as a result of such security fears. For example, some voluntary programmes, such as in Karamoja in 2001-2, have resulted in uneven disarmament, leaving communities without arms or state protection and vulnerable to attack by armed, neighbouring clans. Faced with resistance to disarmament, states have frequently enforced disarmament, exacerbating rather than diffusing tensions.

Mediation by government representatives and local civil society organizations is crucial to diffusing pastoral conflicts before they escalate into violence.

As a number of studies note, mediation by government representatives and local civil society organizations is crucial to diffusing pastoral conflicts before they escalate into violence.³⁰

The allure of alternative livelihoods

Arguably, one of the strongest reasons why interventions have so far yielded little success is the enormity with which the problem of pastoral conflict is often depicted. As a result, governments and international agencies tend to focus on the pastoral system *itself* as being fundamentally incompatible with the structure of the modern state system.³¹ This has had two linked impacts on development assistance.

First, development assistance has tended to focus on alternatives to pastoralism rather than attempting to fix failings in the system. Notable examples of this tendency to replace rather than refine include attempts to privatize common rangelands (such as problematic efforts in northern Senegal)³² and measures taken to encourage the development of sedentary modes of production – notably in successive, albeit ineffective, programmes in Northern Uganda.³³

A second impact has been the withdrawal or diminished engagement of donor-funded programmes and aid agency activities in pastoral regions. Due to the difficulties of navigating complex pastoral relations, and in finding ways of improving livelihoods within this system, many larger aid organizations are becoming less involved in the pastoral regions of the East African Sahel. In East Africa – notably Uganda – development assistance has been further discouraged by the threat of armed violence, some of which is attributable to a backlash against heavy-handed, state-led efforts to disarm pastoral communities.³⁴ These responses fail to recognize the role pastoralism plays in many rural economies as well as the fact that pastoral groups interact with the market on many different levels. For these reasons, a number of commentators have stressed the need for states and international development agencies to work with pastoral systems, rather than shun them as incompatible with the state.

30 Bevan, J. 2007.

31 Despite the fact that the pastoral mode of production has traditionally been very closely linked to the economies of sedentary populations. See Blench, 2001 and Bradburd, Daniel. 1997. 'Nomads and Their Trade Partners: Historical Context and Trade Relations in Southwest Iran, 1840-1975.' American Ethnologist Volume 24. Issue 4. November. pp. 895-909.

32 The sub-division of rangeland into private ranches has led to severe ecological, economic and social problems. See Thébaud et al. 1995. 'Recognising the effectiveness of traditional pastoral practices: lessons from a controlled grazing experiment in Northern Senegal.' Drylands Issue Paper E55. London: International Institute for Environment and Development. April.

33 See Bevan, 2007; Uganda. 2005. *Karamoja Integrated Disarmament and Development Programme: Creating the conditions for promoting human security and development 2005-2008*. Kampala: Office of the Prime Minister. June.

34 Bevan, J. 2007.

Conclusion

The pastoral system is not fatally flawed. Rather, in many African regions, it has been pushed out of equilibrium by a mix of climactic change, changing demographics and inappropriate national and international interventions. Some of the key factors facilitating armed violence include:

- Climactic change and redefined land uses that have impaired pastoralist access to rangeland and prompted intra-pastoral tensions and conflict with sedentary communities;
- Growing urban populations adjacent to pastoral regions, which have encouraged economically-motivated crime, including commercialized cattle raiding and banditry;
- A lack of infrastructure and state-provided security, which permits lawlessness and deters investment that could counteract some of the economic motivations for armed violence;
- State policies of supplying pastoral groups with weapons for reasons of community defence, protecting peripheral regions from foreign incursion, or in order to destabilize adversaries;
- The failure of governments and international agencies to grasp the complex dynamics of pastoral violence has led to ineffective violence-reduction and development policies.

Without a concerted effort by states and international agencies to operate within extant pastoral systems for resource-sharing and dispute-settlement, pastoral violence seems set to remain the most internationally visible feature of the regions in question.

Suggested Reading

1. Bevan, James. 2007. *'Fear and loathing in Karamoja: An assessment of armed violence and the failure of disarmament in Uganda's most deprived region.'* Small Arms Survey Working Paper. Geneva: Small Arms Survey Occasional Paper.
2. Blench, Roger. 2001. *'You can't go home again': Pastoralism in the new millennium.'* London: Overseas Development Institute.
3. Mensour, Elhadj. 2005. *'La Prévention et la gestion des conflits agriculteurs/éleveurs dans les arrondissements de Guidan Roumji et Dakoro au Niger : Les actions menées par le Buco à travers la mise en œuvre du PASEL.'* Niamey: PASEL.
4. Ellis, James and David M. Swift. 1988. *'Stability of African pastoral ecosystems: Alternate paradigms and implications for development.'* Journal of Range Management, Vol.41. pp: 450-459.

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