

# **The Politics of Pastoral Violence: A Case Study of Isiolo County, Northern Kenya**

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## 1.0 Introduction

Conflicts and violence taking the form of cattle rustling, ethnic violence, displacements and massacres have characterised inter-communal and clan relations among the various pastoralist communities of northern Kenya and the greater Horn of Africa region. In addition to stress factors such as environmental degradation, drought, famine and other natural catastrophes, pastoralists face complex challenges of land related conflicts (some of which are related to administrative and electoral boundaries); recurrent violent conflicts aggravated by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs); tensions with agricultural communities; and human-wildlife conflicts aggravated by competing uses of land for commercial ranching and wildlife conservation, amongst others.

However, while the nature of pastoral conflicts has changed over time, recent violence in northern Kenya suggests that there are worrying new dynamics at play. The nature of pastoral conflict seems to be changing yet again alongside northern Kenya's new importance in the country's wider development strategy and also in relation to the politics surrounding its new decentralised political system. Through a case study of Isiolo – historically the gateway to northern Kenya – this paper examines in detail the dynamics of new violence in the region's pastoral areas and assesses their implications for conflict reduction and peacebuilding efforts. While many automatically link intensifying development with more secure livelihoods, well-being and a greater propensity for peace, a different picture emerges from recent violence in northern Kenya. Here, violence and militarism have accompanied and marked developmental transitions. Even with the advent of a new constitutional dispensation that heralded a devolved governance system, from Samburu to Isiolo to Marsabit violence has persisted and flared anew across northern Kenya. Fear of devolution and complex political and economic interests converge to fan violence among Isiolo's communities.

This study posits that in anticipation of the new devolved governance system, the nature of pastoral conflicts has shifted as new county-level political and governance structures are introduced. Under the new devolved system, considerable public resources are channelled through county governments, setting the stage for intensified competition between county-level elites. If not well managed, the allocation of public resources at the county level could intensify violence at the local level and thereby undermine the promise of the much-awaited devolution agenda and national security and stability. While the conflicts and violence in Isiolo appear to be the usual traditional pastoral communities' competition for pasture and grazing land, this study will argue that dominant political and economic interests are the major drivers of ethnic violence in the county. Thus, using the Isiolo's pre-election violence, this paper will reveal how economic and political linkages which are increasingly tying Isiolo (as elsewhere in northern Kenya) into the national economic and political trajectory

are reinforcing destabilising processes and potentially undermining livelihoods. The study argues that the conflicts that engulfed the multi-ethnic Isiolo town were fundamentally founded on a recognition that pastoral conflict dynamics have been transforming over a long period, and traditional structures have often been ill equipped to cope. Increasingly, the government has been blamed for laxity in enforcing security and rule of law in Isiolo as in other parts of northern Kenya affected by violence, including the town of Moyale on the border with Ethiopia (Jamah 2012).

With devolution and the emergence of northern Kenya as a key focus for the country's future national development, the dynamics of violence are set to transform again. The policy challenge is how to prevent violence from spreading while ensuring that pastoralists are able to benefit from the region's economic transition. Hence, the conflicts have critical political and economic dimensions which must be discerned to present a coherent roadmap for its effective management and the reduction of violence.

This study posed two key research questions. Firstly, what is the nature of the contemporary conflict in Isiolo? Secondly, how did political agendas and economic interests shape and sustain the violence in Isiolo during the 2011/2012 period? The study utilises a qualitative case study research design drawing on both secondary and primary data collection methods, notably fieldwork, focus group discussions and informant interviews between July and December 2012. The study concludes by advancing some policy recommendations to enhance the prospects for durable solutions to the crisis in Isiolo under the devolved system of governance.

## 2.0 Background to the study

Across the African continent, from the Tuaregs of Mali to the Pokots of Kenya and Uganda, violence, inter-clan warfare and conflict are almost synonymous with livestock keeping populations and nomadic culture. However, in Kenya as in many other East African countries, a number of factors have changed the nature of pastoral conflict into something that is arguably more violent, connected to wider political, economic and social dynamics. These factors include the proliferation of deadly SALWs; climate change; competition over shrinking grazing lands and water resources as a result of increased human settlements and emergence of zoned wildlife parks/conservancies; and politicisation of communal relations. Additionally, due to weakened traditional governance systems, breakdown of inter-communal social contracts, elders' loss of control over the youths, the persistence of *moran* (warrior) culture, and politicisation of peacemaking processes, pastoral conflicts have become quite intractable. Porous borders coupled with insurgency and counter-insurgency forces supported by neighbouring states add a regional security dimension to Kenya's conflict situation. Over time, livestock rustling has become an instrument of violence

among pastoral communities. Indeed, contemporary pastoral conflicts are no longer simply cultural sport or localised competition over scarce natural resources, but rather a manifestation of the generalised violence in the country's evolving politics and deep political divisions at clan and ethnic levels.

In Kenya the prevention, management and eradication of the dehumanising practice of cattle rustling among pastoral communities has often defied contemporary solutions – making policing of the region a Herculean task for the government and law enforcement officials. Highlighting a debilitating policy paralysis and operational failures in countering pastoralist militarism, Osamba (2000) argues that the Kenyan authorities seem to have weakened authority over bandits and cattle rustlers who are heavily equipped with sophisticated weapons and conduct destructive predatory activities. Indeed, as pastoral communities acquire more powerful weapons, cattle rustling has become not a cultural affair but rather an opportunistic method of resource accumulation.

As forces of modernisation penetrated into these communities, power and economic transformations occurred, significantly shaping the worldview and behaviour of the younger generations. Further, according to Duffield (1997), the elders' authority has been undermined by the introduction of a market economy and the increased polarisation of rich and poor that resulted in labour migration. Through such economic transformation, the pastoral youths have found new routes to influence and wealth creation, including the flourishing armed militias of young men and the new income available through banditry. Others, such as uneducated *morans*, have found new livelihoods and adventures as security guards or casual labourers in various Kenyan cities. For these warriors, as the trappings of the modern economy sink in, the affinity for past cultural practices and respect for traditional elders' authority over them significantly diminish. Instead these groups of entrepreneurial youth engage in business, some of which is of a criminal nature. This economically-driven generational transformation impacts negatively on inter-communal relations and continues to shape dynamics of conflict and violence in northern Kenya.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that patterns of development and under-development tend to have similar complex effects of violence among all the pastoral societies of northern Kenya. Furthermore, weak control by Kenya's security forces coupled with the poor state of socio-economic development and infrastructural inadequacies have undermined independent Kenya's effective presence in its northern frontier, resulting in what Kurimoto and Simonse (1998) termed a classical State retreat. Similarly, in 1950 the American writer Farson famously quipped of the Northern Frontier District as "... one half of Kenya about which the other half knows nothing about and seems to even care less." Indeed, a mere mention of the phrase 'northern Kenya' evokes images of poor roads, warlike people, guns, devastating

famines, malnourished children – basically, a 'bandits' kingdom'. In a confidential interview, a former Kenyan Provincial Administrator noted that Kenyan government officers posted to the region often lamentingly referred to the North Eastern Province (NEP) as 'Nothing Except Problems!'<sup>1</sup> Such perceptions and realities of developmental marginalisation have earned northern Kenya the humiliating tag of Kenya's 'other frontier' (Menkhaus 2008).

As Menkhaus argued, due to the Kenyan state's weak presence in the north, it took the emergence of local peace structures to help negotiate peace in collaboration with state security and administration officials (Ibid). Nonetheless, community pacts among pastoral groups have also become short-lived affairs. When pressed by state organs for an end to violence, many politicians participate in such talks as a chance to politick. Especially in the cases where peace talks are held in hotel boardrooms, warring youths often conveniently ignore these resolutions. Moreover, such peace talks easily collapse because they lack clear enforcement mechanisms and do not effectively address the underlying issues such as livelihoods and employment for the vulnerable groups, especially uneducated youth. Thus, the youth turn to militancy to seek livelihoods through the barrel of a gun. Further, weak state response supported by corruption among security and judicial officials permit a situation where the offenders go free, perpetuating a cycle of impunity and disregard for the rule of law.

Thus the northern frontier remains trapped in excruciating poverty, a poor state of development and persistent insecurity. However, it is important to realise that northern Kenya received significant national developmental and political attention after the 2007 elections when the Kibaki regime created a special Ministry for the Development of Northern Kenya and other Arid Lands (notably mandated to develop and implement Arid and Semi-Arid Development policies and programmes). While the real impact of the Ministry of Northern Kenya cannot yet be seen, the devolved governance system promises to positively shift the region's developmental fortunes, as evidenced by the intense partisan lobbying for the region's support in the run-up to the March 2013 elections.

Paradoxically, Isiolo, the main case study of this research, was once the Headquarters of the Northern Frontier District and considered a gateway to the wild north. Today, it still promises to be a gateway to a devolved northern Kenya, expected to usher in economic transformation. Vision 2030 is the Kenyan government's flagship set of mega projects with key pillars in political, economic and social dimensions, aimed at speeding up the country's attainment of middle income status by the year 2030. Initiated by President Kibaki's government, the key components of the Vision 2030 projects were aimed at opening up and revitalising development in the country with a special focus on regional tourism and infrastructural connectivity. Isiolo County is one of the major beneficiaries of the mega projects, set to

benefit from an international airport, a Resort City and a railway link under the proposed Lamu Port South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) project – making the county once more a critical gateway to the north. Additionally, as espoused in the Vision 2030 plans, Isiolo will be the gateway of Kenya’s future development, which depends on tapping energy supplies from the north and developing infrastructure (including road and rail networks) to promote greater economic integration with its northern neighbours, especially Ethiopia and South Sudan. How these infrastructural developments and transitions coexist with conflicts and violence is a policy problem that this study addresses. While we see the fortunes of the region begin to change for the better as it becomes more central to Kenya’s national development, we also see changes in the dynamics of conflict and violence.

## **2.1 The policy problem: The politics of pastoral violence**

The above section has set out the background of the historical context, drivers, nature and experiences of both colonial and post-colonial Kenyan authorities in managing pastoral violence. This section gets to the heart of the case study of violence in Isiolo from 2009 to 2012 by dissecting the policy problem that this study address and why it matters, and expounds on the arguments advanced.

Today, from its critical spot in Kenya’s Vision 2030 project, Isiolo promises greater development as a cure for the cancer of marginalisation, violence and conflict. According to Vision 2030’s plans Isiolo will host a major Resort City, an international airport and a railway line linking Lamu to Lokichogio and Ethiopia. However, while significant developments are planned for Isiolo, a wave of violent conflict has swept the city in recent years. Whereas the conflicts and violence in Isiolo appear to be the usual traditional pastoral communities’ competition for pasture and grazing land, this study will argue that dominant political and economic interests are the major drivers of ethnic violence in the county. Indeed, violence has become subsumed within devolution politics and competing ethnic tensions around the development agenda.

Pastoral violence and militarism seems to accompany and mark developmental transitions in northern Kenya. Even with the advent of new constitutional dispensation and the arrival of devolved governance systems in the country, violence continues to persist and define inter-communal relations in northern Kenya. Indeed, such violence presents a critical policy problem because it threatens to undermine the rollout of meaningful devolution of political and economic governance for the region’s people as well the implementation of Vision 2030. In Isiolo, fear of devolution and complex political and economic interests apparently continue to fan violence among the various communities. Thus, even with critical economic developments coming closer to

northern Kenya and the distance between central Kenya and the northern frontier becoming smaller, violence seems to persist as a critical ingredient of the transition process. This peculiarity continues to undermine the institutions of peacemaking due to the evolving nature of the drivers of violence in northern Kenya. Considering that violence seems to coexist with development and transition in northern Kenya, despite the changing governance landscape, will the promise of the new constitution remain a mere mirage for the pastoral counties and their residents?

The new political system devolves considerable public resources to the county level – which if not well managed could intensify violence at the local level and thereby undermine the much-awaited devolution agenda. Worse still, incessant violent conflicts between the various pastoral groups, in addition to unwarranted loss of human lives, could divert critical economic resources from developmental objectives. Thus, this study hopes to inform policy developments geared to assisting the emerging county governments in the prevention and management of violent conflicts in the region.

## **3.0 Understanding the changing dynamics of contemporary pastoral violence in Isiolo**

In the recent times, prior to the outbreak of violent ethnic conflicts in Tana River on the coast and Moyale town of Marsabit County, the central Isiolo region was one of the most affected hotspots of violence. In the 2009 Census, Isiolo County had a cosmopolitan population of 143,234, with Borana, Samburu, Gabra, Sakuye, Turkana, Meru and Somali being the main ethnic groups in the region. From late 2011 into 2012, hundreds of people lost their lives and livestock were stolen in intense, well-organised violence as the Borana and Somali communities violently clashed with their Turkana neighbours. The conflict led to widespread internal displacements, the torching of several villages and schools and market disruption, with grave knock-on effects on people’s livelihoods. According to reports by the Isiolo District Peace Committee (DPC), from 2009 to January 2013, the Isiolo violence claimed 165 lives and about 9,000 livestock were stolen; an estimated 2,900 were displaced (Huka 2013; AlterNet 2011).

Many conditions and factors have aggravated the situation of violence. Whereas the fragility of the ecosystem, bad governance, biting rural poverty and weakened livelihood systems all exacerbate conflicts in pastoral regions such as Isiolo (see Suda 2003), it was the dominant political and economic interests that drove and sustained the violence in Isiolo, aided by easy availability of SALWs. Although some analysts have singled out ethnicity as a driver of violence (see Ndeta undated), this study takes the position that ethnicity and identity factors are just readily available instruments utilised by

politicians and war financiers to mobilise young people into violence with the aim of causing deeper divides among the different ethnic groups.

### **3.1 The role of dominant political and economic agendas**

It is becoming increasingly, vividly apparent that the liberal peace thesis – that development is good for peace and that peace and development grow in tandem – does not always hold. Political economists have argued that violence, civil wars and conflicts are not always meaningless but could be functional and useful enterprises (see Cramer 2006; Collier and Hoeffler 2004; 1998; Berdal and Malone 2000; Keen 1998). In most cases, violence is a means of developing and generating alternative wealth and profits. In the context of northern Kenya development is conceptualised as the incorporation of the marginalised region into the country's natural economic infrastructure, especially through economic stimulus and sectoral growth, infrastructural linkages and exploitation of energy resources including oil along with the rest of Kenya. In northern Kenya violence coexists with development and transition because groups' dominant political and economic interests are built around ethnic fears of devolution politics. The changing political economy of pastoralism in north-eastern Kenya, coupling rationalistic competition and contestation for access to economic resources (particularly land) with the fever of devolution politics, has shaped inter-communal relations in Isiolo. These devolution-related fears exacerbated by poor communal understanding of the Constitution and the government's economic development plans, especially the promise of Vision 2030, cultivated antagonistic feelings and brewed mistrust and belligerent relations among the competing ethnic groups in Isiolo. Such political mobilisation promoted catalytic ethnicity-based conflicts and violence.

#### *3.1.1 Political dimensions and agendas: Dynamics of ethnic fears and interests*

Dominant political agendas revolve around ethno-political competition for power to control and dominate the anticipated Isiolo County government. Through such political dominance, groups seek to accumulate economic resources to generate wealth and better their positions in relation to rival communities. Thus, politics is a means to an economic end – a means that catalysed and fanned violence among communities during the 2012 pre-election period. At the time Kochore observed that:

Merging of districts and electoral boundaries under the county arrangement has generated new conflict avenues whereby local populations feel their control over territories are under threat. Tribal alliances are being engineered in order to lock out some tribes so that others share the spoils that will

come in the shape of county elective positions. (Kochore 2012),

Isiolo has two electoral constituencies: Isiolo North (encompassing Isiolo town, Merti and environs) and Isiolo South (encompassing Garba Tulla and environs). According to the 2009 census, Isiolo North and Isiolo South had 100,176 and 43,118 persons respectively. Although the Boranas are the dominant ethnic group in both constituencies, particularly in Isiolo North, their political supremacy and numerical strength came under extreme test during the 2007 General Elections. Mr Joseph Samaal, a candidate from the Turkana community, came in second in the race for Isiolo North's parliamentary seat, which was narrowly captured by Dr Mohamed Kuti from the Sakuye tribe that is affiliated to the Borana community. The close election result alarmed the Isiolo Borana community, which became increasingly concerned that their grip on political power in Isiolo (in a way inhibited by their own internal fragmentation along clan lines) was slipping alongside the growing influence of the Meru, Somali, Turkana, Sakuye and Gabra.

In 2012, according to the voter registration data from the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), Isiolo North and Isiolo South registered 33,434 and 11,840 voters respectively and brought the total number of registered voters in the county to 45,274. Thus ethnic alliances and clan politics dominated the race for various political positions in Isiolo – with the major currency being placed on the newly created positions of Governor and Senator. Thus, beyond the imperatives of academic and professional qualifications, ethnic and clan membership determined the eventual electoral outcome for the top seats (Abdi 2012). The lucrative positions of the Governor and Senator were hotly contested by the Borana, Meru, Turkana and Somali communities. Negotiations within and between elites in these different communities in the build-up to the March 2013 elections produced some loose alliances shaping the outcome of the election (see Table 1). Like elsewhere in Kenya, Isiolo's political campaigns were anchored on ethnic and clan structures and not driven by ideological agendas. The election outcome reflected inter-ethnic rivalries and the projection of dominance by the Borana.

#### *3.1.2 Economic dimensions and interests*

Despite its geographical proximity to the prosperous farming belt of central Kenya, Isiolo County is afflicted by poverty, underdevelopment and poor infrastructure. According to the Commission on Revenue Allocation (CRA), the country's poverty rate stands at about 76.2 percent. Indeed, as Abdi notes,

The county has improved water provision rate of 84.6 per cent, 55.6 per cent sanitation, electricity connection of 18.5 per cent, paved roads 0.2 per cent and fair marrum roads of 67.5 per cent and mothers delivering at health centres at 28 per cent.

**Table 1: Top politicians, political alliances and line-up for the March 4 General Election**

<b>Contested Position</b>	<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Professional Background</b>	<b>Tribe</b>	<b>Party/ Alliance</b>	<b>Outcome of the Election</b>
Governor	Godana Doyo	Human Rights Lawyer and Executive Director of the Kenya National Human Rights Commission	Borana	United Republican Party (URP)/ Jubilee	Won
	Dominic Maingi	Businessman based in Nairobi and Isiolo and a former Director of the Kenya Electricity Transmission Company Limited	Meru	Alliance Party of Kenya/ Jubilee	Lost but came second
	Abdullahi Bahari	Former MP Isiolo South between 2002 and 2012 and also a former member of the Pan-African Parliament	Borana	The National Alliance (TNA) / Jubilee	Lost
Senator	Mohamed Kuti	Veterinary Doctor, former Minister for Livestock and former MP Isiolo North (since 2002)	Sakuye	TNA/ Jubilee	Won
	Charfano Mokku	Former MP Isiolo North between 1988 and 2002	Borana	Orange Democratic Movement (ODM)/ Coalition for Restoration of Democ. (CORD)	Lost
Member of Parliament for Isiolo North	Joseph Samal	NGO official and businessman	Turkana	URP/ Jubilee	Won
	Mohamed Konso	Former Commissioner of the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights	Borana	ODM/ CORD	Lost
Women Representative	Tiya Galgallo	Former Commissioner with Interim Electoral and Boundaries Commission	Borana	TNA/ Jubilee	Won
	Jillo Mumina Konso	Teacher, national Chairman of the Mazingira Green Political Party and runs the NGO Women Access Programme International championing issues of human rights, gender and political activism	Borana	ODM/ CORD	Lost
	Rehema Dida Jaldesa	Widow of the late Moyale MP Dr Guracha Galgallo and former Board Member of the Seed Company Limited and international NGO Concern Universal Kenya	Borana	URP/ Jubilee	Lost
	Lucy Mworira	Businesswoman and founder of Hope for Children and Women of Isiolo and Women for Peace and Development organisations	Meru	ODM	Lost

The county has a big tourism base with three game parks – Buffalo Springs, Shaba and Bisanadi. (Abdi 2012)

Despite this rich tourism base, the above data paints a grim picture of a rather poor county which is in need of the economic and social progress that devolved governance promises.

Dominant economic interests revolve around land ownership and exploitation of any sellable commodity, particularly sand and livestock. As this study shows, although land is a critical economic asset and foundation for development for any community, in Isiolo it has become a major driver of violence and conflict. In Kenya, the new constitutional dispensation promises to drastically change land ownership and utilisation by creating a National Land Commission (NLC) charged with regulating and registering land in the country. In the majority of pastoral areas of Kenya, community lands have been categorised as trustlands, held in trust on behalf of the community by the former County Councils. No one can get a title for any of this community land unless specially decreed and adjudicated. Thus, the new Constitution secures the place of trustlands and community lands. However, while all lands in Kenya are considered a national resource, the county governments will have a significant say in how land within their territories is utilised and allocated to investors to spur economic growth. It is envisaged that in order to generate revenue, most counties will start privatising community trustlands and initiate revenue generation measures.

Whilst most pastoral communities' land is considered trustlands, tensions are emerging in particular areas of Isiolo – which is earmarked for significant development. This is because through a special Presidential decree and registration processes, lucrative parts of trustlands can be allocated to individuals or groups of investors. Land is also a sensitive issue because of the growing migration of elites, investors and communities from both pastoral and agricultural regions of Samburu, Baragoi, Marsabit, Meru and other parts Kenya to the strategic Isiolo area. Land is becoming scarcer in the Isiolo region. Therefore the politics of land, fear and poor communal understanding of the LAPSET projects, and a related scramble for land by speculators and potential investors added a highly flammable dynamic to the conflict experienced as violence in Isiolo. According to Diida Golicha, the chair of the Isiolo DPC, 'lack of proper land tenure policy and regulations are the major factor fuelling conflict in Isiolo County' (quoted in Huka 2013). Indeed, at the core of the conflict and violence in Isiolo is the land question, which has been greatly politicised (Abdi 2011a). A report by a local Kenyan NGO, Act! on the scarcity of land as a conflict accelerator in Isiolo observed:

An important dynamic is that the land in Isiolo is divided in a manner that by its very nature encourages conflict. The land in Isiolo is divided into portions: one fifth of the land is taken up by national and international military camps,

another one fifth is taken up by Game Reserves and Parks. Ranches take up another one fifth, while yet another one fifth is used by the Government as livestock holding grounds. The last one fifth is left for human settlement, pasture, farming, commercial usage, among other human activities. The first four masses of land are restricted. This leaves one fifth of Isiolo for competition among resident communities. It is this competition that has tended to escalate into deadly violence. (Act! 2012)

Relating to the economic aspects of land scarcity, ownership status and related tensions, the emergence of wildlife conservancies is a recent phenomenon which adds another dynamic to the Isiolo conflict. Conservancies are designated wildlife conservation blocks – an ecotourism concept that brings local communities into positive coexistence with wildlife found within their localities. The conservancies are thus seen as communal wildlife conservation blocks from which communities also derive income and livelihood. Over the last few years, four conservancies have been set up in the Isiolo region. These conservancies are believed to generate handsome revenue for the owners and respective associations and allied communities as well as the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) and the Isiolo County Council. While most of the revenue goes to the investors, community groups benefit from the windfalls of ecotourism, employment and access to markets for sale of artefacts to the tourists. These conservancies are manned by locally recruited, well-armed and trained scouts.

Overall in Isiolo County there is little understanding of how wildlife conservancies were created and managed, although ideally the KWS and the Isiolo County Council (as the trustee of communities' trustland) should be involved. The creation of these conservancies was shrouded in mystery and incubated fear and speculation in the minds of many resident pastoral communities. These fears are due to growing feelings among some nomadic communities that these 'legalised' conservancies are the new tactics of land grabbing or strategic communal displacement. Especially for the pastoralists, demarcation of large blocks of land as conservancies is seen as denying their livestock suitable grazing opportunities as well as obstructing their traditional migration routes.

Thus, the politics of conservancies brought an interesting angle to the dynamics of the conflict in Isiolo and fanned ethnic violence. The Borana and Somali communities have questioned how the conservancies were created and argued that these are a Trojan horse for the Turkana and their supporters to expand their rangelands.<sup>2</sup> In a leaders' meeting aimed at resolving the conflict, the then area MP for Isiolo North, Mohamed Kuti, accused the warring communities of illegally setting up three wildlife conservancies in Isiolo and Merti without necessary community consultations or approvals from the Isiolo County Council and the KWS (Abdi 2011a). Kuti argued that these conservancies have hired heavily armed scouts equipped with automatic



guns, binoculars, communication gadgets and military attire. Calling on Kenya's Internal Security Minister to investigate the operations of these conservancies, Kuti argued that 'these illegal conservancies are given millions of shillings by international donors. Their workers are game scouts during day and bandits at night' (Ibid). Hence, while wildlife conservation seemed to be the intent, the conservancies were turned into economic enterprises by business and political elites to generate wealth for themselves and their allies. For instance, it was reported that in Isiolo's West and Ngare Mara locations, the conservancies' owners charged about Kshs 500 per lorry for permits to harvest sand for construction (Ibid). An intelligence official in Isiolo estimated that about 100 trucks from as far as Meru arrive daily to collect the sand.<sup>3</sup> A simple analysis reveals that the gangs controlling the sand sites could accrue some Kshs 1m per month over a 20-day working period. Such easily lootable resources formed the backbone of the war economy in Isiolo; the profits from resource exploitation are ploughed into procuring armaments.

Youth unemployment is another contributing factor to violence in Isiolo, as it is in Kenya more generally. Poverty and high rates of unemployment have pushed some young men into forming gangs for hire. In addition to engaging in drugs (*miraa/khat* chewing which is endemic in Isiolo), ethnically organised predatory gangs have emerged around sand harvesting sites in the Isiolo West location – one of the epicentres of violence. It was in Isiolo West during the 2007 General Election that a Turkana politician won the seat, defeating the Somali incumbent. This ethno-political competition should be considered in light of Isiolo West's importance as a transit route with rich reserves of high quality sand for construction. Prior to the breakout of violence in Isiolo and surrounding areas, Turkana and Somali youth jointly controlled the sand harvesting ventures.<sup>4</sup> However, as rifts and tensions deepened, rival gangs competed to control the lucrative sand harvesting sites. Aided by the easy availability of small arms, rival youth gangs with political and economic backing resorted to illegal exploitation of sand harvesting in the area. When a local politician was arrested for political incitement, it came out that he was linked to a sand harvesting cartel, fuelling rumours that local politicians are behind the youth militias fighting to control the harvesting sites. According to a report in Kenya's *Standard* newspaper,

The politician and some leaders are reported to have illegally hived off vast tracts of land, registered community-based organisations and secured funding from a renowned private wildlife conservancy. A cartel was also set up under the same organisation to charge a levy on sand harvesters in competition with the County Council of Isiolo for the last six months. (Abdi 2011b)

For many unemployed youth, the Isiolo violence became a lucrative enterprise that must be perpetuated. Further, the vested interests of rival gangs and their associated predatory economic activities undermined peacemaking efforts.

Such predatory activity was aided by the proliferation of SALWs. An official reported that during the war the government distributed 300 guns to the Borana community without vetting individuals who were issued with the government's firearms. According to some Turkana politicians this politically-motivated pastoral armament process skewed military power relations between the two communities and further destabilised the region, forcing the Turkana and other groups to acquire more weapons.<sup>5</sup> On another level, the Borana leaders accused the government of selectively targeting them for disarmament.<sup>6</sup> These suspicious feelings were fuelled by the fact that at the time, the then Assistant Minister for Internal Security (Honorable Lesirma) hailed from the Samburu community. The Boranas argued that due to his possible influence, the government seemed more sympathetic to the Turkana and Samburus of Isiolo, thus rendering them vulnerable to attacks.

Regional insecurity and porous borders with Ethiopia, South Sudan and Somalia did not help the situation. According to the officials of Isiolo's District Security Intelligence Committee (DSIC), the county is a preferred arms transit and shipment point, as it sits on the route linking Kenya's north-eastern region that borders southern Somalia with Turkana County that borders South Sudan.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the County Security team believes that government-armed Kenya Police Reservists (KPRs) who were poorly vetted (if at all) could be involved in the violence and constituted militias for hire along with other civilian combatants from the warring Turkana, Borana, Somali and Meru tribes. Indeed, a police official confided that according to their records there are an estimated 4,000 KPRs in Isiolo, but many cannot be accounted for during head counts. Therefore the government has no control over their movements or use of weapons and ammunition.<sup>8</sup> There are growing concerns that KPRs from rival ethnic communities form the backbone of gangs that attack and terrorise neighbouring groups. Many officials interviewed for this study called for comprehensive disarmament and fresh vetting of all KPRs before any new guns are issued to them.

The violence in Isiolo also relates to the anticipated developments linked to the government's Vision 2030 strategy as well as the proposed LAPSET Project. Plans to establish a Resort City near Isiolo as part of the Vision 2030 project have contributed to a steep increase in land prices and ethnicised competitions to grab lands that have turned violent (Kiarie 2012). The feasibility study identified the Mulango area, which is sandwiched between the Katim and Oldonyo Degishu hills 20km northwest of Isiolo town, as the ideal site for the proposed Resort. Indeed, at the request of the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, the Isiolo County Council as the custodian of communities' trustland have reportedly set aside 6,500 acres of land for allocation to Kenyan and foreign investors.<sup>9</sup> Isiolo residents, like other communities through whose territories the LAPSET corridor runs, have objected to what they perceive to be the secretive nature in which the Isiolo County Council dealt with this issue, lamenting that there were no community consultations or sensitisation about this project. Given

the opaque manner in which the resort issue has been handled up to now, rumours have spread, feeding into existing inter-group tensions and violence.<sup>10</sup>

Fear and speculation of external 'invasion' have sharpened ethnic rivalries and competition – some often believed to represent proxy wars between down-country government officials, foreign investors and other actors outside the region and country. There were reports that senior national level Kenyan politicians and government officials have already acquired strategic land reserves around the Resort City. Due to poor civic knowledge and weak land laws, these communities are killing each other without understanding the official land maps and designated areas of the Resort City and transport access corridors.<sup>11</sup> As Kochare observed, ethnic rivalry and violence is linked to the competition between the various communities to claim a stake of the land with a view to its future sale to investors (Kochore 2012). Echoing such sentiments, local Turkana leader Paul Mero in an interview with IRIN observed,

Bandits are being used to force the Turkana to leave; we are being fought to pave way for other people to settle on our ancestral land... it is not fair that we are blamed and accused of being cattle rustlers. (IRIN 2011)

A young informant in Isiolo noted that these communities are just 'sitting ducks' and they had better begin seeking business skills to work in hotels and restaurants and other businesses that will emerge in the proposed Resort City.<sup>12</sup>

Isiolo International Airport, estimated to cost Kshs 900 million, was successfully launched by President Kibaki on 8 February 2013. For many the international airport, co-located within Isiolo and Meru Counties of the larger Meru region, will be another potential source of conflict between neighbouring county governments. The airport's design reveals that the major terminal and control towers are located in Isiolo County while the 2.4km long and 34m wide runway is in Meru County. While this could be a point of inter-county relations over a shared infrastructure, due to ethnic rivalries between the Borana and Meru (the dominant business group), the potential for future violence is high.

On another level, due to Isiolo's excellent supply of water and good pastureland, dairy camel herders have converged from as far as Wajir to engage in the profitable camel milk trade in Isiolo, supplying the large Somali-populated Eastleigh market in Nairobi. An intelligence official noted that at the height of the 2012 violence, Isiolo's camel population was estimated at 50,000, generating about Kshs 500,000 daily from milk sales alone.<sup>13</sup> The camel herders potentially generate about Kshs 10m per month (based on 20 working days in a month). This revenue greatly stimulated Isiolo's economy, although some believed that the proceeds could also have served to buy arms. Lamentingly, a Turkana elder commented,

'we do not hate camels; but these Somali camels have two tails – a natural one and the other a herder with a gun. The guns are what we do not like here.'<sup>14</sup> However, with the intensified war, camel milk supplied by the Somali camel herders and charcoal brought in by the Turkana have become scarce commodities (IRIN 2011). Somali elder Somow Mohamed, narrating the economic cost of war on the Somali population, noted,

These families [about 1,000] depend on the sale of camel milk to buy food and clothes, [and] pay fees and drugs for those who are sick; now they have no option but to beg. We have been forced to become beggars by these bandits. (Ibid)

Similarly, a Turkana councillor, Ekuam Terru, contended, 'we [Turkana] have suffered for many years as a result of politics. The situation is now worse because it is now a combination of politics and campaigns to take away the land, sand and farms of the Turkana' (Ibid). Such counter-accusations flavoured with political manipulation instilled fear in the minds of many local communities – motivating many to take up arms and protect their communal lands and other economic lifelines.

#### **4.0 Attempts to mediate and manage security**

During 2011 and 2012, various initiatives were undertaken to tame the violent conflict and broker peace among the belligerent communities. These fall into two categories, security interventions and peace dialogues, both undertaken to contain and resolve intercommunal conflicts in Isiolo. The government responded through deployment of security officers, arrests of local politicians and businesspersons believed to be fanning and sponsoring the violence, threats of disarmament and security operations. Additionally, softer approaches of community level peace dialogues have been initiated by state and non-state actors, notably by the Isiolo DPC with the support of national partners such as the National Steering Committee on Peacebuilding and Conflict Management, National Cohesion and Integration Commission, National Drought Management Authority and civil society actors. All these interventions have registered different levels of success. Although deployed late, the high physical presence of security forces brought calm to the area. The DPCs with the support of the Isiolo Inter-agency Forum (comprising state and non-state institutions) tried to mediate the conflict.

However, little success was registered for several reasons. First, the cosmopolitan nature of Isiolo made it very difficult to form agreements and pacts given its multi-ethnic make-up and complex political economy. For instance, as a result of different cultural and religious background the Turkana and Samburu communities (the majority of whom are Christians or animists) did not honour the Modogashe Declaration, which they deemed Islamic since the document was negotiated

among the Muslim communities of north-eastern Kenya. Thus, they felt that the provisions of the Accord, for example payment of blood money of 100 camels for the killing of a man and 50 camels for the killing of a woman, was based on Islamic law which did not apply to them. So often the DPCs, in addition to acting with resource and capacity constraints, did not have clear or widely acceptable frameworks around which to mediate among the warring communities. Additionally, the involvement of politicians and the political and economic nature of the conflict were more complex and complicated for the DPCs to resolve through mediation and dialogue. This is because as explained above, the Isiolo violence had both political and economic drivers, and this undermined DPC's capacity to reduce conflict and promote peacebuilding. Further, the magnitude of the violence totally overwhelmed the DPCs who were ill-prepared and lacked clout to engage in high-level political dialogue.

Nonetheless, one of the key turning points was the communal accord signed in Isiolo by the warring communities and their political aspirants reiterating commitments to peace in mid-December 2012 during sessions supported by Saferworld (Salesa 2012). However, the accord collapsed before the ink could dry. In addition to the political nature of the conflict, the Accord did not elicit unquestioned compliance from some of the warring communities and lacked oversight and enforcement by the security teams. Additionally, seeming lack of political will to deploy security forces to deal with ethnic violence under the devolved governance system is seen by the locals a plot by the national government to undermine devolution. Some local community leaders argue that although security is still a national function, the leaders of the national government could use the growing and untamed insecurity in northern Kenya as a perfect excuse to dissolve and takeover the management of the affected counties. This is an issue that requires serious governmental reflection so that the devolution agenda is not undermined.

Thus, contrary to the positions espoused by many analysts linking intensified development with more secure livelihoods, well-being and a greater propensity for peace, this study reveals otherwise. Against the promise of the liberal peace thesis, violence and militarism seem to accompany development and political transition in northern Kenya. The advent of the new devolved governance system has brought about a new dynamic of violence driven by dominant political and economic agendas as opposed to the usual conflicts over scarce natural resources or retrogressive cattle rustling practices. As demonstrated, for the economically promising Isiolo region, fear of devolution and complex political and economic interests converged to fan intercommunal violence in the run-up to the March 2013 General Elections. Therefore, considering the changing nature of conflicts in northern Kenya, it is imperative to have a paradigm shift in the prevention and management of conflicts such as that which occurred in Isiolo. Indeed,

attempts to resolve and arrest these destructive dynamics should draw upon critical policy options advanced below.

## 5.0 Policy recommendations

Based on the findings, the study advances the following policy recommendations:

- The leadership of the county government must promote inclusive governance—getting the best out of the devolved system (through the application of negotiated democracy and inclusive governance models) by bringing all communities together and ensuring equal representation in sharing of political and economic power at the executive and county assembly levels. It is imperative that the county governments adhere to ethnic, minority and gender representational rules, comply with the various constitutional requirements and ensure equity and equality for all the county residents.
- To manage development under transition, it is imperative that greater civic education, advocacy and sensitisation campaigns around Vision 2030 projects be undertaken to ensure that the communities in Isiolo fully understand and appreciate the Vision 2030 projects and position themselves to reap the economic windfalls. It is of paramount importance that the governmental agencies charged with the implementation of the Vision 2030 projects, together with county governments, civil society groups and the private sector, conduct intensive campaigns to allay the fears of community groups and ensure that they benefit from the devolved governance system and are adequately prepared to benefit from the Isiolo Resort City and other infrastructural developments.
- The authorities should, within the frameworks of the land policy and relevant legislation and policy review, establish and popularise guidelines for setting up of wildlife conservancies. It is imperative that the NLC, KWS and County Land Board together with the county government hold sufficient communal consultations when setting up these conservancies and review the existing guidelines.
- Dialogue, mediation and long-term peacebuilding should be intensified through the harmonisation and strengthening of the implementation of the Modogashe Declaration. It is imperative to make the Modogashe Declaration acceptable to non-Muslim pastoral societies. It is important that the draft National Peace Policy address

this issue of compliance and elaborate enforcement and other Alternative Dispute Resolution mechanisms to ensure that communal pacts are binding, enforceable and complied with.

- Youth peace dividends, empowerment programs and in particular skill development is essential for youth and women to benefit from the Vision 2030 mega projects. It is important to prepare the youth with the requisite skills (such as business, technical, hotel management, tourism, language, etc.) so that they can benefit from the emerging economic and investment opportunities in Isiolo. Youths should be facilitated to benefit from the recently launched Uwezo Fund by the Jubilee Government and start alternative economic livelihood projects – which, if well designed, could be positioned to engage in lucrative interactions with local and international investors in the Resort City and other infrastructural developments in Isiolo.
- Better policy is required on security management, starting with fresh vetting of all KPRs and comprehensive disarmament in Isiolo and the neighbouring counties of Samburu, Wajir, Garissa, Tana River and Marsabit. This approach will go a long way in expanding zones of peace and stability– which could create durable platforms for sustainable development.
- The government should invest in and utilise early warning and response systems so that conflicts are proactively mitigated, mediated and managed. These call for improved state response capacity, in terms of funding, personnel, firepower and logistics, including vehicles.
- It will be imperative to put a judicial mechanism in place whereby perpetrators of violence are prosecuted in a timely manner to deliver justice and deter collective revenge attacks.

### End Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> A confidential briefing by a former official of Kenya's Provincial Administration who served extensively in northern Kenya, Nairobi, December 2012
- <sup>2</sup> Focus group discussion with Isiolo DPC members, July 2012

- <sup>3</sup> Interview with an intelligence officer, Isiolo, December 2012
- <sup>4</sup> Focus group discussion with Somali community members, Isiolo West, July 2012
- <sup>5</sup> Interview with a Turkana elder, Isiolo, December 2012
- <sup>6</sup> Interview with a Borana professional, Isiolo, December 2012
- <sup>7</sup> Briefing by Isiolo's District Security Intelligence Committee (DSIC), Isiolo, July 2012
- <sup>8</sup> Interview with a senior police official, Isiolo, July 2012
- <sup>9</sup> Interview with a civil society activist, Isiolo, July 2012
- <sup>10</sup> Focus group discussion, Isiolo, December 2012. Indeed, the appointment of former Head of Civil Service Ambassador Francis Muthaura (a Meru) by President Uhuru did not go down well with some of the communities from Isiolo and the coastal regions.
- <sup>11</sup> Focus group discussion, Isiolo, July 2012
- <sup>12</sup> Interview with a Turkana youth group leader, Isiolo, July 2012
- <sup>13</sup> Confidential briefing by an intelligence official, Isiolo, September 2012
- <sup>14</sup> Interview with a Turkana elder, Ngaremara, Isiolo, July 2012

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