Mitigating Cross-Border Intergroup Conflicts along the Ethiopia-South Sudan Border

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The Horn of Africa is afflicted by poor human security, conflict, and terrorism and is one of the most insecure regions in Africa. In addition, international borders in the region are porous, contested, volatile, and fragile. All of these factors heighten conflict among the borderland people in the region. A prime example of border porousness and fragility can be found along the Ethiopia-South Sudan border. These two countries share an 874km (543 miles) open and fragile international border along the Gambella Regional State of Ethiopia. The local people on the border consist of the Murle in South Sudan, the Nuer, the Anyuaa, and other highlander communities on both sides of the border.

People along the border suffer from lack of infrastructure and education, exclusion from social and economic development, and cross-border intergroup conflicts. These problems are aggravated by South Sudan's instability and by insufficient economic development and diversification in Ethiopia. The problems manifest through the intensity of corruption, illicit trade, smuggling of goods, circulation of small arms, and border insurgents. With the increasing availability of small arms, cattle rustling, child abductions, and civilian deaths have become more frequent and fatal since 2010. For instance, in 2010 Murle insurgents raided 960 cattle, abducted 72 children, and killed 247 people. Recently, in 2016, the Murle insurgents killed 224 people, rustled 2,000 cattle, and abducted 137 people from the Jikany-Nuer and Anyuaa.[1] This cross-border intergroup conflict is exacerbated by high levels of illiteracy, poverty, and weak connections between central governments and the borderland regions, and the generally weak inclusion of customary institutions in conflict resolution efforts.

Policy Options and Recommendations

One of the key factors impacting cross-border intergroup conflict is South Sudan's political instability. Long-term resolution of this problem cannot be achieved without the country's stability. However, even as long-term peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan continue, additional steps can be taken to reduce borderland conflict. These steps should aim to mitigate conflict, encourage peacebuilding, and provide sustainable development in border regions, and will require reforms and support from the national governments of South Sudan and Ethiopia, as well as international partners.

1. For Regional and International Organizations

    a.   **Increase pressure on South Sudan to fix the political instability:** The political instability of South Sudan and lack of clear development strategies for the borderland regions directly contribute to

cross-border intergroup conflicts. Therefore, regional and international organizations should consider increasing their pressure on South Sudan to address political instability. In particular, the African Union (AU) could play a leading role in strengthening the capacity of the Transitional Government of National Unity (TGNU) to implement the ceasefire and provide transitional security arrangements through monitoring mechanisms, economic reform, and political reconciliation.

2. For Ethiopia and South Sudan

a.   Increase collaboration between the governments and traditional institutions: Customary institutions in the borderland regions lack formal integration into and articulation with government structures. As a result, there is a lack of community representation in, or contributions to, formal government structures and institutions. Meanwhile, many customary institutions remain widely respected and trusted by the societies in which they operate and offer mechanisms for peace and conflict resolution.[2] Therefore, governments can help to revitalize customary institutions, by recognizing their legitimacy in the community, and by granting them the ability to govern their people with government support. More importantly, both governments could consider the creation of a forum or ad hoc committee for the state and customary institutions to work together on issues related to peace and security in the borderlands. This will have the added benefit of helping to mend the disconnect in center-periphery relations.

b.   Develop a uniform disarmament and protection policy: The cooperative agreement signed between Ethiopia and South Sudan in 2012[3] to address marginalization faced by borderland communities was a good first step. However, its implementation was not sufficiently resourced or coordinated to achieve the desired results. Through this agreement, Ethiopia successfully disarmed borderland people but could not provide an alternative source of protection as South Sudan was unable to disarm the borderland population on its side, which led to an imbalance in the perceptions of security and insecurity on different sides of the border. Thus, while implementing disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) in the conflicting communities, both governments would do well to coordinate timelines and efforts, and also work on security sector reforms (SSR) to help fill security gaps. To do this, it is important for the governments to develop a uniform disarming policy by consulting clan leaders, prominent elders, chieftaincies, and other influential people in the borderland communities. This could help the governments to proceed with implementing the disarmament policy by convincing the communities to cooperate through their local leaders. The government could also consider creating protection measures and policies to protect disarmed individuals who still need security. Moreover, both governments could possibly consider implementing a policy to control the illegal circulation of small arms across the region to further enhance their protection policy.

c.   Demarcate the border and develop borderland management social policy: Ethiopia and South Sudan should consider formally demarcating their border with support from the African Union Border Program. Demarcation will be an effective tool in alleviating components of this cross-border conflict, but in order to be effective it should be supported by soft actions on border social policy to control the movement of smuggling goods, illicit trade, and circulation of small arms, in addition to regulating cross-border trade.

d.   Public awareness campaigns: Borderland communities share similarities in culture and kinship. For such blended communities, it is better to mend people-to-people relations through soft border social policy and legitimize their interactions based on rules and regulations. Therefore, public awareness campaigns that focus on citizenship and adherence to the rule of law should follow these controls within borderland communities. Such campaigns will help borderland communities to respect international borders regardless of kinship ties.

3. For the South Sudanese Government and International Partners

a.   Incorporate the Murle people into socio-economic and political development: The Murle people are one of the most disadvantaged groups in South Sudan in terms of social, economic, and political development. Poverty and illiteracy are major factors that have propelled the Murle into conflict, worsening the cross-border instability. The livelihood of the Murle centers on cattle as the sole basis of their economic activity. Youth have little to no education and are often idle rather than participating in economic activities. The lack of representation in the workforce and limited educational opportunities could be alleviated by the Government of South Sudan and international partners through the implementation of integrated development plans focused on education, job training, and infrastructure in the borderland areas of Pibor and Boma State. The Government of South Sudan and development partners could empower traditional leaders, youth, and women of the Murle through education, agriculture, vocational training, and political participation. This will help the Murle to have enhance their economic livelihoods and reduce the impetus for turning to insurgency.

4. For the Ethiopian Government and International Partners

a.   Provide protection from child abductions and cattle rustling: The people of the Anyuaa and Jikany-Nuer in Ethiopia suffer from child abductions and cattle rustling by Murle insurgents. In 2016 an organized group of Murle fought with the Jikany-Nuer, killing 208 people, raiding 2,000 cattle, and abducting 131 children.[4] Child abduction is a serious human rights violation and worsens insecurity in the region. The Ethiopian government and international partners should consider paying attention to these human rights violations and address it with the government of South Sudan and other regional and international organizations. Additionally, the federal government of Ethiopia with the semi-autonomous regional state of Gambella could protect the borderland people by reassessing their security gaps among Regional Special Forces, Regional Police, and National Defense in terms of information exchange, immediate decisions to take action, coordination, budget allocation, and transportation.

For an in-depth analysis of cross-border intergroup conflicts in the Horn of Africa, specifically Ethiopia-South Sudan borderland people, see the accompanying Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding Research Paper No. 19 by Tasew Gashaw.

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

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1.   Dereje Feyissa, *Playing Different Games: The Paradox of Anywaa and Nuer Identification Strategies in the Gambella Region, Ethiopia* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 31-53.

2.   Patta Scott-Villiers, Hussein Boru Ungiti, Diba Kiyana, Molu Kullu, Tumal Orto, Eugenie Reidy and Adan Sora, "The Long Conversation: Customary Approaches to Peace Management in Southern Ethiopia and Northern Kenya," Future Agricultures Consortium, *Institute of Development Studies* no. 022 (2011), https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/ds2/stream/?#/documents/7613/page/1.

3.   Tesfa-Alem Tekle, "South Sudan, Ethiopia sign security, development cooperation accord," *Sudan Tribune*, April 4, 2012, http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article42139.15.

4.   Dereje Feyissa, *Playing Different Games: The Paradox of Anywaa and Nuer Identification Strategies in the Gambella Region, Ethiopia* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 31-53.

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