

**Politics and IR Working Paper**



**Cross-border community integration  
in the Kenyan and Ethiopian borderlands**

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*Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia; Jimma University, Ethiopia*

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## Abstract

This paper conveys the findings of a study of cross-border community integration in the Ethiopia–Kenya borderlands. The Borana Zone in southern Ethiopia and Marsabit County in northern Kenya house the same ethnic groups living in similar ecologies; sharing similar livelihood systems; sharing trans-clan and trans-boundary trade networks; and exhibiting the same trans-boundary migratory patterns. The study made use of qualitative research, with data collected from interviews and focus group discussions. It found that cross-border communities interact with each other in various ways despite formal borders that do not consider their similar ecologies, livelihoods and migratory networks. Ethnic social networks and indigenous institutions play a central role in supporting cross-border community integration, promoting cross-border trade and resource utilisation as well as the settlement of disputes that may arise in the course of cross-border interaction. The study suggests that the two states should recognise and use indigenous institutions, along with formal state institutions, to foster cross-border community integration. They should also focus on joint development projects that would benefit the people straddled across the border, and harmonise their policies on cross-border mobility as well as border area rangeland management.

**Keywords:** Cross-border, community integration, Borena Zone. Marsabit County, Ethiopia–Kenya borderlands.

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CROSS-BORDER movements date back a long time, but became a global phenomenon in the 20th century. Historical records indicate that the migration of people across borders is as old as nation-states (Nayyar 2000). Given the interactions between natural and human systems, pastoral populations cross national boundaries for many reasons. However, pastoral population mobility is mostly associated with dryland ecological challenges. As a result, international boundaries are freely crossed by pastoralist populations (Scoones 1995).

People in the Ethiopia–Kenya borderlands share socio-cultural traditions and practices. Unlike the pre-colonial

time, when people easily moved from one geographic area to another, colonial demarcation constrained the traditional mobility of the pastoral communities, redefining this as ‘cross-border’ movements, with borders becoming barriers to mobility (African Union 2010).

Jenet et al (2016) point out that those national boundaries were drawn through sparsely populated pastoral areas, and cut across indigenous rangelands. Accordingly, African state boundaries were crafted artificially without considering the socio-economic and cultural links of people who live there that consequently divided the same ethnic groups. By and large, these borders – and their constraints on mobility – have been retained in the post-colonial era. As a result, national authorities are largely insensitive to traditional rights, and regard cross-border mobility and trade as illegal.

According to Galaty (2020), borders in East Africa are difficult to monitor and defend and are places of frequent crossings. Mobility across borders is essential mainly for visiting relatives, grazing and trading, and those activities do not undermine state sovereignty. Pastoralists do not cross borders to challenge the state but to secure access to grazing, kinship ties, or access to schools and markets. However, there are instances of trans-border mobility involving territorial expansion, livestock raids, resources or revenge that do threaten neighbouring security forces.

The borderlands relevant to this study are Marsabit County in northern Kenya and the Borana Zone in southern Ethiopia. The Borana, Gabra, Burji, Sakuye, Somali and other communities live on both sides of the border.

In colonial and post-independence Kenya, the ‘northern frontier’ was deliberately marginalised, while southern Ethiopia experienced peace and development challenges. The long distance between these remote border areas and the decision-making centres and capital cities of Addis Ababa contributed to their underdevelopment.

Despite the division of the same ethnic groups by arbitrarily demarcated borders, they have continued to do well through local trade, traditional natural resource management and participation in social and cultural activities. However, these social systems have been

eroded over time by geopolitical factors, underdevelopment and poverty, intercommunal conflicts, and erratic weather conditions. These factors have been exacerbated by the growing scarcity of natural resources and population growth, and have resulted in displacement and cycles of vulnerability to humanitarian emergencies.

Under Kenya's 2010 constitution, greater political power and financial resources were devolved to 47 county governments. In Ethiopia, power has also been decentralised along ethnic and linguistic lines. With decentralisation and devolution policies in place, the need for cooperation between economically and culturally linked border regions has emerged as one of the most important area-based development strategies for strengthening regional cooperation that provides peace and sustainable development.

The mobility of humans as well as livestock will always be a feature of the Marsabit and Borana zones, and cross-border movements complicate various social interventions. For example, communicable and Zoonotic diseases thrive in conditions of unregulated cross-border movement and weak border management systems that inhibit transparent and active disease surveillance. Respondents in both Ethiopia and Kenya stated that the international boundary affects smooth cross-border mobility.

### Existing practices

The cross-border communities involved in this study are pastoralists. Pastoralism is defined as a complex system that attempts to maintain a desirable balance between pastures, livestock and people in perpetually changing environments. The erratic nature of the environment has prompted pastoralists across the world to adopt similar livelihood systems (Nori et al 2008).

According to Little (2007), informal trade has been practised before and since the imposition of colonial state boundaries. He has also shown that more than 95 percent of livestock trade in Eastern Africa is informal. This is due to the remoteness of the areas concerned, and the rigid bureaucratic rules adopted by central administrations about imports and exports.

According to Ethiopian respondents, Ethiopian police and customs offices view the cross-border trade in

livestock as illegal, but migrants do not experience any problems in selling livestock on the Kenyan side.

Cross-border trade is underpinned by kinship and other social ties among the cross-border people. According to Little (2007), there are strong ethnically based trading partnerships in the areas including extended credit periods and without contracts or other forms of legal protection.

According to an IGAD representative in Ethiopia, the border is not a border for the community, and pastoralists travel freely across it. Whether governments like it or not, pastoralists cross international boundaries with their herds. The Kenyan pastoralists water their herds in the Borana zone, and there are labour and trade exchanges across the border. Conflicts arise over access to scarce resources such as water and pasturage, which provides the local conflicts with socio-economic and political dimensions. Otherwise, conflicts are not common. This points to the need for systematic rangeland management on both sides of the border, among others to prevent resource degradation.

According to an IGA representative, cross-border trade is mostly informal and is legal within a zone of 20 kilometres. There is a degree of cross-border disease control, even though this is relatively weak.

### Government initiatives

In 2015, the governments of Ethiopia and Kenya, in partnership with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the United Nations, launched an integrated cross-border initiative to foster peace and sustainable development in Marsabit and the Borana Zone. Titled the Cross-border Integrated Programme for Sustainable Peace and Socio-economic Transformation, the five-year plan formed part of an agreement between the two countries to foster environmental protection, trade, development and peaceful coexistence in their border regions.

The two governments have entered into several Memorandums of Understanding on the joint development of these border areas, involving road infrastructure, telecommunication, electricity and trade. Moreover, peace-building initiatives are under way, managed by state as well as customary institutions. While some

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progress has been made, experts agree that much more needs to be done.

### Challenges of cross-border community integration

According to the IGAD representative in Ethiopia and other experts on pastoral affairs, challenges to cross-border community integration include:

**Political instability:** The region is significantly exposed to intercommunal violence, and is a safe haven for the Oromo Liberation Army.

**Informal trade and human trafficking:** Trade in the border region is largely informal, as they are far from their capitals and because people fear custom regulations. They prefer informal trade to formal trade.

**Natural hazards:** The borderlands are highly vulnerable to erratic weather conditions.

**Erosion of socio-cultural values:** The borderland people have traditional natural resource management systems, but these have gradually been eroded because of a lack of recognition, and because their governments have exploited this knowledge for own purposes.

**Poor management of natural resources:** Cross-border rangeland areas are exposed to invasive plant species which are currently not being controlled, due to a lack of coordinated and participatory natural resource management.

**Failure to recognize and use indigenous knowledge:** States and state institutions in both countries are failing to recognise and make use of indigenous knowledge in these borderlands.

### Conclusion

Cross-border cooperation is crucial for a variety of reasons: to promote trade, facilitate movement, control trans-boundary diseases, mitigate conflict, etc. This

should involve both customary and state institutions in which the pastoral people are represented.

### Ways forward

- \* Both states should adopt a harmonised development approach that will include intergovernmental and non-government organisations.
- \* Human and environment-centred infrastructural development should be strengthened
- \* Regional policy frameworks should be harmonised and implemented in coordinated ways.
- \* Inter-community dialogue should be strengthened, among others via joint community forums.
- \* Cross-border policies should be translated into mother tongues, thereby making them accessible to local communities.
- \* Cross-border people's forums should be promoted. Among others, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in Eastern Africa should stage an annual pastoralists' day during which pastoralists could share experiences about natural resource management, and discuss peace-building and conflict management issues.

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## NOTES

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