



Violent Conflict Implications of Mega Projects in Nyangatom Woreda, Ethiopia

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Introduction

This briefing note explores conflict in the past 10 years in the Nyangatom Woreda of South Omo Zone, Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples' region, Ethiopia. The Nyangatom are one of the 16 ethnic groups indigenous to the Zone. They are found at the southwestern corner of the Zone adjacent to two international boundaries with South Sudan and Kenya.

The study is situated in a physical and political environment that has shown rapid change due to dam and large-scale agricultural projects. The Lower Omo witnessed rapid transformation over the past decade, following the construction of the Gilgel Gibe III dam, large sugar cane plantations, factories and other investments, along with some infrastructural and demographic change.

This briefing is part of a research project "Shifting In/equality Dynamics in Ethiopia: from Research to Application (SIDERA)." The project explores environmental, income and conflict dynamics after the state-led development interventions. The key research objective addressed by the Conflict Working Group of SIDERA is 'investigate how changing resource access has affected conflict dynamics.'

Understanding the above issues is crucial to formulating policy options. A set of policy recommendations, stemming from the data presentation and discussion, are presented at the end of the note.

Concepts and Methodology

Conceptually, the study considers violence to be a negative manifestation of conflict. And, violence, in turn, is viewed both in terms of its physical and structural manifestations. While the former (physical violence) primarily relates to direct attacks, killings/murders, raiding, and damages, the latter (structural violence) pertains the conditions that create and sustain inequalities like negative effects on livelihood. As such, the absence of direct violence might indicate, but not determine, the absence of other forms of violence. Violence might be absent in cases where the groups in conflict do not see violence as a viable option to gain their interest or are not equipped with the tool of violence. On the other hand, the absence

Key Findings

- Recorded, violent incidents have shown a decline in 2017/18;
- Cattle raiding remains the most frequent violent act;
- The decline of violent incidents is not indicative of positive peacebuilding efforts;
- Changing resource access is a reason for the decline of violence with some groups and the increase of violence with others, discouraging interaction with some and encouraging it with others;
- According to zone and woreda officials the safety net (particularly distribution of food) program is also instrumental in the decline of violence;
- The decline of violence has to be complemented with acts of genuine efforts to build positive peace among communities in South Omo Zone.

of such kind of physical violence does not essentially indicate the presence of peace. Positive peace requires removing structural violence, which actually means equitable development and advancement of human security.¹ Primarily qualitative methodology was used to understand the nature of conflict in the woreda and the Zone in general. Through the use of in-depth interviews with community leaders, and government experts and officials and focused group discussions (FGD), the data collection focused on actor and event mapping. In addition to these, by extracting reports of violent incidents, the study has established an understanding of the frequency of violence by creating a timeline of the incidents.

Results and Discussion

In Nyangatom, resource-access dynamics have shifted significantly in recent years. The commencement of

¹ Galtung, J. (2011). Peace, positive and negative. The encyclopaedia of peace psychology.

The Omo-Turkana Research Network is an international consortium of social and environmental scientists researching the impacts of hydrological, agricultural, and social change on the people and ecosystems surrounding the Lower Omo Valley and Lake Turkana. OTuRN affiliates collaborated on the research project SIDERA: Shifting In/equality Dynamics in Ethiopia: from Research to Application.

filling of Gibe-III dam's reservoir in 2015 disabled the possibility of retreat-agriculture along the banks of the Omo River in Nyangatom and other woreda. This came on top of the Nyangatom's loss of pasture and farming land in Kibish, close to the Kenyan border, in living memory. This has led to utilisation of a range of coping mechanisms, including collecting and selling of firewood and relying on wild fruits. As such, signs of overutilization of available natural resources are on the increase in the woreda.

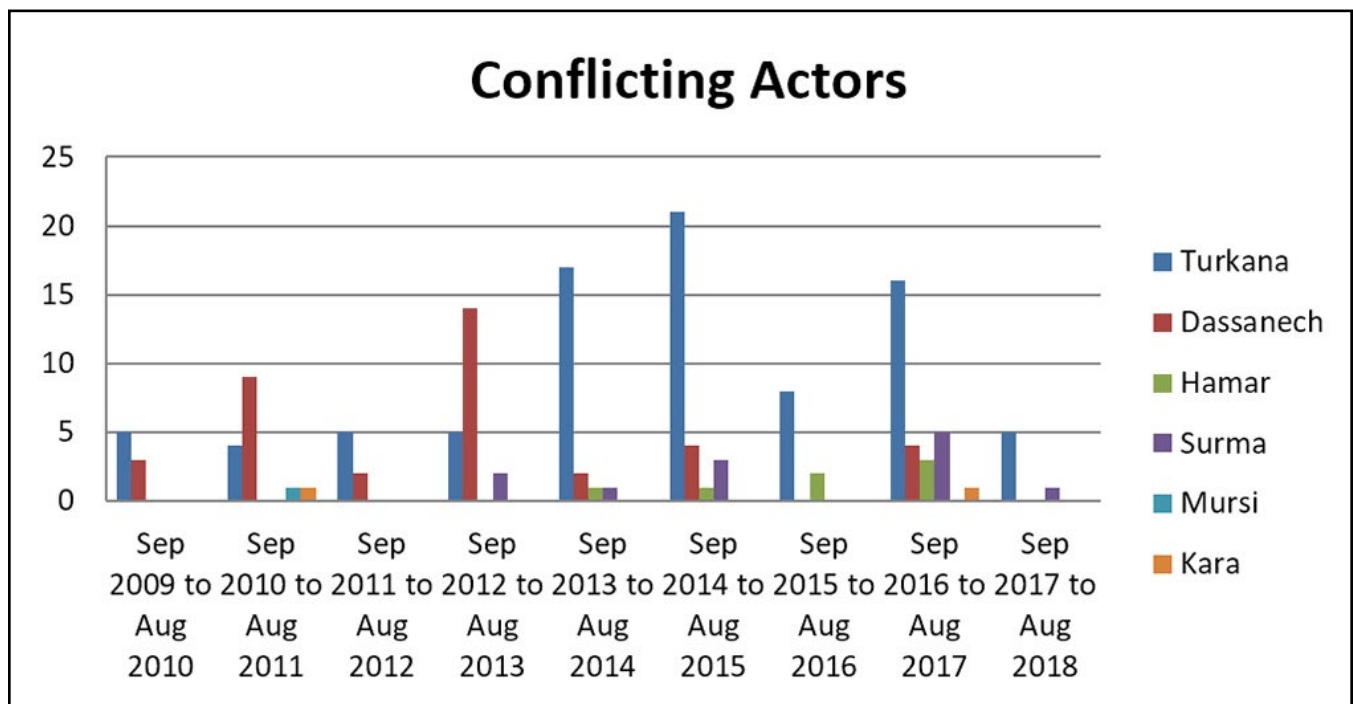
In the violent conflict timeline we developed through interviews and FGDs with local community, shows that historically major violent episodes are triggered during times of drought and food shortage, often involving migration to neighbouring groups for food. These organised, large scale violent episodes are resource demanding, and as a result conducted as revenge in times of relative abundance. Such large-scale organised violence is absent now, while the Nyangatom continue to be known to be in conflict almost all their neighbours, the Dassanech, Surma, Mursi, Hamar, Kara (Karo), and Turkana (in Kenya). The longstanding peaceful relation and alliance they have from their neighbours is with the Toposa in South Sudan. Informants note that compared to previous decades, currently the Nyangatom have improved relations, through government-initiated processes and/or the reduction in the value of particular resources/territories, with all the groups mentioned above with the exception of the Surma and Turkana. As clearly visible in Figure 1, the conflict with the Turkana has been the most serious one as it claims many lives and result in the loss of cattle.

Figure 1 is based on conflict incidence event records for the Zone's Security and Administration Bureau. It does not allow for a long-term analysis of conflict trends in any systematic manner, while it is very useful in telling general trends. From total violent events recorded between 2009/10 and 2017/18, 52 % is with the Turkana. As such, except 2010/11 and 2012/13, the greatest proportion of violent incidents the Nyangatom engaged in was with the Turkana. In those two years, the Nyangatom-Dassanech conflict dyad took the lead. In more recent years, conflict with the Surma of Bench-Maji zone remains prominent (next to conflict incidence with the Turkana). Moreover, the recorded violent incidents for the year 2017/18 are the lowest from the last eight years.

The primary reason for conflict with the Turkana pertains to boundary disputes. The adjacent areas of Kenya and South Sudan that border with Ethiopia have not been demarcated. The Nyangatom argue that the land across the Kibish River belong to them, and by corollary to Ethiopia, and was taken from them by force. This feeling is shared by the Nyangatom people both pastoralists and in government who claim that the land was taken in living memory. The delay in demarcation of the border poses continued threat to peace in the area. The same view has been reflected by the Dassanech who complain that their land has been given away to Kenya by the Ethiopian government.

The secondary reason (which is an extension of the first) relates to resources (vast grazing land and water). While there is relatively better access to water in the current Nyangatom territory than in the Turkana,

Figure 1: Violent incident events between Nyangatom and their neighbours



there is abundant pasture on the Turkana side of Kibish. In addition to water, other resources connected to food and livelihood such as fishing is a source of conflict between the Turkana and the groups in Ethiopia. According to FGD respondents:

“In most cases, conflicts breakout when droughts occur. Droughts lead to conflict because those affected by droughts go to places where better pasture and water are available. For instance, there have been conflicts with the Turkana whenever the Nyangatom move to areas occupied by them.”

Both the community and Nyangatom Woreda officials stress that the government of Kenya protects cattle raiders by not giving them away or enforcing the return of raided animals. As a result, the efforts to improve relations by cooperating with Kenyan officials are not as fruitful. The practice by the Kenyan government where cattle belonging to the Nyangatom will be confiscated if found on their side of the boundary also hinders peace efforts.

Zone and woreda officials give various explanations for the observed decline in the number of violent incidents between the Nyangatom and their neighbours in Ethiopia. The most important reasons being:

- The government’s dedication to resolving conflicts: There has been better inter-zonal and zone-woreda collaboration leading to special security operations in 2010/2011, 2013/2014, 2014/2015, 2015/2016, 2016/2017 and 2017/2018. These operations purportedly targeted criminals, mainly those who committed murder and looting. The operations are not done exactly as planned due to a number of constraints including suspects crossing administrative boundaries, lack of capacity, etc.
- Change in attitude: In the past, the Nyangatom did not agree to hand in criminals. This attitude changed in very recent years is a result of a series of consultations/discussions with the community and the community’s purported realization that the government can take strong measures.
- Addressing disagreements between local leaders.
- Infrastructural integration (roads and other facilities) and improvements in information systems (mobile phones and internet) coverage: this is contributing to quickly respond to incidences (before they escalate to violent conflicts).
- Establishment of Young Shepherds Peace Committees: these committees play a crucial role in preventing and managing conflicts.
- Shared benefits from improvements in socio-economic development and service delivery (including education). Although it is not directly linked to the decline of conflict in the woreda, it can be

discerned from the in-depth interviews that the safety net (food aid) program was instrumental in this regard. This is particularly apparent during periods of drought and following the decrease in the waters of the Omo River due to mega projects.

The FGD respondents, while acknowledging the efforts by the government administration, mentioned another reason for the decline of violence particularly with the Kara and the Mursi:

“[In the past,] When the Omo flood retreats, the community around it commonly engages in farming. Competition over these resources usually leads to conflicts. In recent years, there is a decline in such conflicts due to two reasons: the new government structure (the establishment of new administrative units/woreda) [the Nyangatom Woreda] and the significant decline in the waters of the Omo River.”

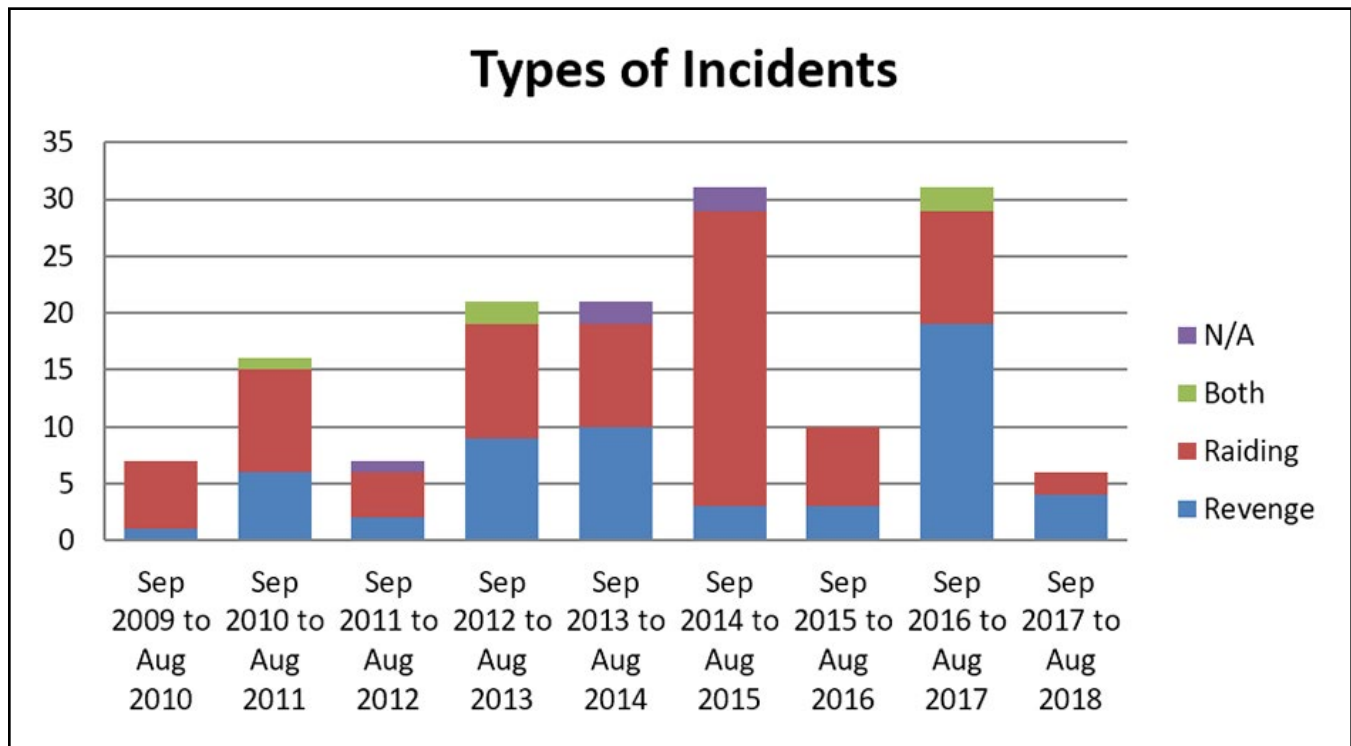
With regards to the relations of the Nyangatom with the Surma, government officials mention the lack of strong local administration/leadership in Bench Maji Zone to collaborate with. FGD participants also agree with this, in the words of one informant:

“The young people of Surma are very violent. They don’t even listen to or respect elders.”

According to the Head of the Pastoralist Affairs Office in Nyangatom Woreda, there are on-going cases with the Surma. He claims that, at the time of fieldwork, his office was working to facilitate the return of 213 goats, 38 ox/cows, 12 donkeys, and 6 weapons raided by the Surma from the Nyangatom and 186 cattle taken by the Nyangatom from the Surma. He claims that the efforts are facing challenges as the Surma elders and woreda officials are not cooperating. The Office was also working for the return of 2,175 goats and 5 oxen the Hamar took from the Nyangatom. This indicates that raiding is still a popular practice in the area. This fact is corroborated by data from the Zonal administration (see Figure 2 on the next page).

As could be discerned from Figure 2, the greatest form of manifestation of violence over the past eight years was cattle raiding. Of the total of 31 violent incidents recorded between September 2006 and August 2017, 10 were raiding and 19 were acts of revenge that also included raiding. The smallest proportion of raiding was recorded in 2017/18 where there were only 2 incidents, while the largest was between September 2014 and August 2015 where 89.6 per cent of the incidents were raiding. What is more worrying is that the proportion of revenge killings seems to be on the increase over the past three years (2015/16, 2016/17 and 2017/18), but what caused this and if this is going to be a consistent trend is hard to tell at this point in time.

Figure 2: Types of Incident



Conclusion

The human security of the Nyangatom is deteriorating due to the large-scale state investments in the Omo Valley. The regulation of the River's flow by the Gibe III dam disabled the old Nyangatom practice of retreat agriculture along the Omo and also reduced the viability of fishing. In the past, such periods of food insecurity were followed by spike in organized violence, involving a large number of people and resources. This is not repeated now for a range of reasons, most of which have to do with state intervention. The creation of a new

woreda in 2006 meant that there is a market and aid delivery in Kangaten, avoiding the necessity of crossing an ethnic boundary. Moreover, the woreda managed to have the greatest majority of the Nyangatom registered as beneficiaries of the PSNP programmer. As such, the Nyangatom are currently on direct support from the government, and when that is not sufficient could sell in the local market their animals and buy grain. A second line of state intervention was control and regulation of pastoral conflicts, through the promotion of self-regulation (such as establishment of Peace Committees, facilitating peace deals with neighbouring groups) and more frequent and more successful security campaigns.

Most conflict incidents recorded by the Zonal government, as well as in community's memory, in recent years involve the Turkana and the Surma. This is often attributed to inability of the Zonal government to deal across the Zone's administrative boundaries. It should

also be recognised that deterioration of retreat farming and other resource availability closer to the Omo is forcing communities to rely heavily on their herd, and necessitating mobility across the contested boundaries between these groups.

What this tells us is that there is no essential transformation of the relations of the Nyangatom with their pastoral neighbours. Rather the government is only successful in taking steps at ensuring the absence of direct forms of violence. While this is an achievement in and by itself, it should also be acknowledged that more work should be invested towards building a positive peace. This necessitates a range of innovative interventions over the longer term.

Policy Recommendations

Over the short term:

- Continue the safety net program to reduce the likelihood of food shortages;
- Ensure increased public participation in conflict prevention and management endeavours;
- Reduce, if possible eradicate, the detrimental impact of on-going mega projects on the livelihoods of communities for example by distribution of well-functioning pumps;
- Ensure that irrigation projects are accessible to local communities;
- Improve the availability of and access to livestock markets.

Over the long term:

- Address the structural sources of violence such as lack of adequate water and access to grazing land;
- Building intergroup relationships among people practicing different livelihoods and different ethnic identities;
- Sensitizing development agents to local realities;
- Build local capacity and resilience to prevent and manage development induced conflicts;
- Resolve cross border resource management issues;
- Demarcate the border with Kenya and South Sudan.

For further details

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