

# research evidence for policy



The Awash River: the object of competition among pastoralists and farmers.  
Photo: Alemmaya Mulugeta

## Understanding new sources of conflicts in the lowlands of Ethiopia

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Case studies featured here were conducted in Ethiopia

### Policy message

- Conflicts over natural resources often arise when specific groups with a sedentary lifestyle wish to control a distinct area of land. This lifestyle restricts mobility, which is vital to the pastoralist economy. Appropriate development mechanisms that ensure pastoralists' access to resources over extended areas need to be developed.
- It is important to seek ways of mitigating the negative effects of development policies that limit the pastoralists' movements and their livelihood strategies.
- Synchronising traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms with modern legal systems can raise the involvement of the local people in conflict resolution.

- Violent conflicts in lowland areas in Ethiopia often involve pastoralists and agro-pastoralists – people who depend mainly or partly on livestock for their livelihood. They migrate in search of grazing land and water for their livestock. The major source of violence in these areas has often been linked to previous government efforts to restrict the movements of these migrant groups. However, other factors have recently appeared on the scene and made the nature and sources of the conflicts more complicated. This issue of *evidence for policy* examines these factors and suggests policy options to reduce the extent and the effects of the violence.

### New causes of conflict in the lowlands

- Sustainable development in the lowland areas of Ethiopia encourages sedentary lifestyles in which pastoralists come to reduce their mobility and to grow crops. Attempts made by past governments have, to a limited extent, decreased the pastoralists' mobility and introduced mixed agro-pastoral production. On the one hand this is encouraging, but on the other hand the measure has restricted the mobility of pastoralists whose livelihood is entirely based on their livestock. The claim to have access to natural resources such as grazing land and water for the livestock has been a cause of conflict between the different types of pastoralists in the

lowland areas. New factors such as the expansion of farms, unfair representation of groups in local administration, and misuse of the principles of decentralisation are emerging trends leading to conflict among the different clans and ethnic groups in lowland areas.

### Expansion of farms

The expansion of state farms in the lower and the upper Rift Valley has led to conflicting claims for exclusive land use among pastoralists, sedentary groups, and state farms. Traditionally, pastoralists maintain communal ownership over grazing land. They have access to pasture and water points. Sedentary groups and state farms, however, encourage individual

## Featured case studies

### Competition for land and water in the Afar Region

In the Afar Region, farms at Melka Sedi, Melka Worer and Awra Melka have displaced people belonging to the Debine Afar group. This displacement subsequently put pressure on another Afar group called the Weima, pushing them into territory claimed by the Karrayyu. The Debine Afar could have moved into extensive rangelands in the Alligedi Plain in the eastern Somali Region, but the presence of the powerful Issa Somali in the area deterred them from doing so.

Competition between the Afar and the Karrayyu over access to vital pasture and water is often accompanied by violence. The violence becomes more intense during the dry season. It largely occurs along the banks of the Kesem River and around the Awash National Park (Ayalew 2001).

- ownership and farming. Conflicts in the lowland areas arise from such differences in the mode of land use.

### Competition over government jobs

- Power that used to be concentrated in the hands of the central government has been given to regional states and local governments over the last few years. In lowland areas this decentralisation of power has given rise to unbalanced representation of certain groups in the regional and district administrations. Local power largely has fallen into the hands of people with the education needed for administration. Pastoralist groups with relatively few educated members have felt marginalised.

### Dominance of particular administrative districts

- The boundaries of the regional states in Ethiopia were drawn over a decade ago to create ethnically distinct states. Each distinct state is dominated by one particular ethnic group. But minorities and clans exist in each state. The minorities and clans may compete for ownership of natural resources such as grazing land and water for livestock. Such natural resource-based conflicts may sometimes create ten-

sion between the different regional states. For example, there were major inter-ethnic tensions throughout the 1990s, particularly on the borders between the Oromia, Afar, and Somali regional states. However, these confrontations did not involve the entire ethnic groups. They were largely limited to individual clan lineages.

In the areas occupied by minorities and clans in a given regional state, political representation and recognition depends on the ability to control administrative units. Many pastoralists think that the dominant group should enjoy exclusive rights to govern its home territory. Larger and more powerful ethnic groups have a better chance of achieving this than the smaller groups. Smaller groups that find themselves in this situation use one or the other of the strategies listed below to strengthen their power:

- Struggle to establish their own districts to improve their political position (Gebre Mariam 2005).
- Seek to expand the boundaries of their area to claim sole possession of disputed localities. This has revived historic animosities over grazing resources and water points.



Traditional rituals incorporate customary conflict resolution. Photo: Alemmaya Mulugeta



- Try to change the names of areas where strategic rangelands, wells, and settlements are concentrated. This legitimises their incorporation into their home territory.

**Changes in conflict resolution**

The emergence of these new causes of conflict has led to a change in the mechanisms of resolving the conflicts. One of these is the commercialisation of conflict resolution. In many cases, pastoralist elders who have been engaged in resolving conflicts have received payments from the government or from NGOs involved in seeking solutions to the disputes. The elders also receive per diems and other benefits in return for their efforts to resolve conflicts.

Elders represented in conflict resolution increasingly compete to represent their kin groups in negotiations with the local government and aid agencies.

The expansion of state structures over the last few decades has introduced modern judicial systems that have replaced customary functions in the lowlands. This has limited the local representatives' access to information on the nature and causes of violence.

It has also reduced the powers of both the elders and the customary systems to solve many of the conflicts that arise in their communities.

**Definitions**

**Pastoralists**

The term "pastoralists" is used to refer to rural dwellers whose livelihoods predominantly depend on mobile livestock production or agro-pastoralism. Agro-pastoralism is the activity that involves both growing crops and semi-mobile livestock production. Pastoralist areas in Ethiopia share three broad characteristics. Firstly, their kinship structure is based on their clan or lineage. Secondly, the people are organised into age or generation-based groups. Finally, religious and ritual mediators, priests or prophets play important roles in managing public affairs (Abbink 1997: 4).



Conservation programmes and expansion of state farms put pressure on grazing land for livestock. Photo: Alemmaya Mulugeta



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## Policy implications of NCCR North-South research

### Ensure access to resources for pastoralists

The principle of giving political recognition to groups that control and claim a distinct area of land restricts the mobility of the pastoralists whose livelihood depends on mobility over long distances. This encourages conflict over natural resources. A mechanism that ensures the pastoralists' access to resources outside their politically delimited areas is desirable.

### Mitigate negative effects of development policies

Past government interventions have decreased livestock mobility, promoted sedentary lifestyles, and encouraged shorter migration routes of herds to water points. Formulating development schemes that incorporate strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of such development policies may be needed.

### Seek synergy between traditional and modern conflict-resolution mechanisms

Pastoralists largely prefer customary systems of resolving conflicts and handling grievances over a formal legal system. There is a need to seek ways in which customary conflict resolution and modern legal systems can work together.

### Further reading

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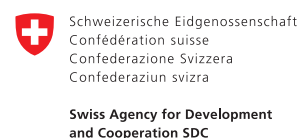
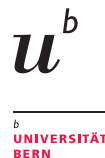
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