



Close-up on renewable resources and armed conflict The spatial logic of pastoralist violence in northern Kenya



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ABSTRACT

Methods of spatially disaggregated conflict analysis are becoming increasingly popular and open avenues for systematic micro-level research. Especially within the field of environmental security research they bear the promise of a better assessment of environment–conflict linkages at the sub-national level. Yet, this branch of research lacks a thorough theoretical involvement with the spatial logic of armed contests over renewable resources and this hampers the use of highly disaggregated data. To address this shortcoming, the present contribution proposes an actor-centred approach, which allows determining the precise locations of violent events in armed contests over renewable resources. It is developed by analysing the spatial logic of pastoralist violence in northern Kenya, a frequently cited example of scarcity-related struggle over renewable resources. The analysis demonstrates that pastoralist violence in northern Kenya has frequently occurred close to well sites and in locations of higher rainfall, which offer favourable conditions for livestock raiding. These results lend support to narratives of pastoralist violence, which emphasise the strategic use of violence with regard to the ecological opportunities and constraints of African rangelands. They also highlight more generally that conflict locations reveal more about the strategic choices made by armed groups in a given conflict situation than about the ultimate causes of their struggle. This calls for a more conscious use of disaggregated data in environmental security research.

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Introduction

Little is known about the potential of adverse environmental conditions and demographic pressures to ignite violent distributional conflicts over renewable resources such as land or water. The bulk of the evidence available today stems from single-case studies, which tend to emphasise the complexity of the matter and the difficulty of isolating ecological from social, political or economical drivers in scarcity-related conflicts (Bächler, 1999; Homer-Dixon, 1999; Kahl, 2006; Ohlsson, 1999; Suliman, 1993). The few authors who have attempted to unveil systematic interactions between ecological, demographic and conflict indicators in large-*N* analyses have produced inconclusive and sometimes contradictory results (see Buhaug, 2010a; Burke, Miguel, Satyanath, Dykema, & Lobell, 2009, 2010; De Soysa, 2002; Esty et al., 1998; Hauge & Ellingsen, 1998; Salehyan, 2008; Theisen, 2008; Urdal, 2005). As argued by several scholars, an important reason for this is their use of over-

aggregated country-level data, which do not adequately capture relevant sub-national variations in the variables of interest (Buhaug, Gleditsch, & Theisen, 2010; Raleigh & Urdal, 2007). In response to this shortcoming, a number of spatially disaggregated studies have been conducted more recently. These pay particular attention to local variations in environmental and demographic indicators as well as in the incidence of violent conflicts (e.g. Fjelde & von Uexkull, 2012; Østby, Urdal, Tadjoeddin, Murshed, & Strand, 2011; Raleigh & Urdal, 2007; Theisen, 2012; Urdal, 2008).

Using finer-grained data and GIS-based methods bears the promise of a better assessment of environment–conflict linkages at the sub-national level, but it also imposes new requirements on the theoretical foundations of these studies. To use spatial regression analysis with disaggregated data as an effective instrument, researchers need a sound understanding of the spatial dynamics at work in the conflicts they are studying. The observation that a violent event occurred in location A rather than in location B adds little to the knowledge about environment–conflict linkages unless it is related to an explicit idea about how environmental and conflict indicators are expected to coincide *in space*. Unfortunately, most analysts in current disaggregated research miss to deal thoroughly

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enough with the spatiality of armed conflicts over renewable resources. They are thus prone to erroneous inferences when interpreting spatial correlations between local indicators of environmental scarcity and conflict. Theisen (2012), for instance, who observes that conflict locations in Kenya do not necessarily coincide with locations where population pressure on arable land is high, concludes somewhat rashly that land scarcities play only a minor role in explaining communal violence in this country. Yet, while his result indicate local land scarcities to be a poor predictor of *conflict locations* in Kenya, it does not preclude them from being an important cause of violence. Theisen neglects here that scarcity-induced violence does not necessarily need to take place where environmental scarcities are most severe. This is made evident by a closer look at the origins and the spatial logic of the clashes to which he is referring. According to Kahl (2006) and Oucho (2002), high fertility rates, large influxes of migrant farmers from other provinces and competition over farmland were important contributors to inter-communal tensions in Kenya's Rift Valley. Once initiated, communal violence however did not take place where land scarcities were most severe. Attacks rather occurred in towns and on rural settlement schemes harbouring immigrant populations as part of a strategy to expel and dispossess them of their land (Anderson & Lochery, 2008; HPG, 2008; ICG, 2008; Kahl, 2006; Kanyinga, 2009).

To address this shortcoming, this article invites analysts of the environment–conflict nexus to approach the spatial dynamics of armed contest over renewable resources from the perspective of the involved actors. Understanding what they want and what ecological constraints they face helps explaining how they strategically utilise relevant attributes of their environment. This, in turn, allows a precise assessment of the likely locations of violent events in conflicts over renewable resources. For the sake of detail, the analysis focuses on armed clashes between pastoralist groups in northern Kenya, which I refer to in this article as 'pastoralist violence'. However, the general approach guiding the analysis is simple and straightforward to adapt to different conflict situations and types of resources. Armed violence between pastoralist groups in Kenya and elsewhere is frequently cited as a typical example of inter-communal strife over access to scarce subsistence resources. Under the highly unpredictable ecological conditions of arid and semi-arid lands (ASAL) resources such as water, land or livestock are imbued with exceptional value and thus elicit competition (Butler & Gates, 2012: 24; Meier, Bond, & Bond, 2007: 721). Competition for resources, in turn, informs particular strategies of armed pastoralists with regard to relevant attributes of their environment such as the emplacement of wells, pastures and communal resource boundaries. Taking this spatial logic into consideration, it is possible to explain why pastoralist violence is likely to occur in specific places and hence to gain a better grasp of the spatiality of armed conflicts over renewable resources.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows: the second section presents pastoralist violence in northern Kenya as an exemplary test case for studying the spatial logic of armed contests over renewable resources. The third section elaborates hypotheses about how armed pastoralists utilise different opportunities and constraints of their environment and about how this is likely to affect the spatial distribution of pastoralist violence. These hypotheses are tested by means of a spatial regression analysis in the fourth section. The fifth and final section discusses the empirical results as well as their wider implication for disaggregated environmental conflict research.

An exemplary case of resource-conflicts under adverse ecological conditions

The area under investigation comprises the northern Kenyan counties Marsabit, Isiolo, Mandera, Samburu, Turkana and Wajir

(see Fig. 1). High temperatures make northern Kenya a dry region. Rainfall is erratic and varies considerably across space and time. The majority of rains fall in higher altitudes and usually in the month between March and May as well as October and December (McSweeney, New, & Lizzano, 2008). Variations in rainwater availability are further amplified by extreme weather events such as droughts and floods. These harsh conditions impede agriculture and thus pastoralism is the predominant activity. People in northern Kenya sustain their livelihoods essentially through the herding of sheep, goats, camels and cattle and exploit the mobility of their herds in order to adapt to frequent changes in the spatio-temporal distribution of pastures and water (Adano, Dietz, Witsenburg, & Zaal, 2012: 69; McCarthy & Di Gregorio, 2007; WRI et al., 2007).

The ecological vulnerability of the region is further exacerbated by high levels of poverty and poor access to public services (GoK, 2007; WRI et al., 2007). For a long time, pastoralism in Kenya has been regarded as unproductive and destructive to the environment and public resources have primarily been directed to farming areas in the central and western parts of the country (Eriksen & Lind, 2009: 829). As a result, Kenya's northern rangelands remain economically marginalised and poorly equipped with road infrastructure, health and education facilities, as well as other services which would help local communities to diversify their livelihoods and withstand extreme weather events (Schilling, Akuno, Scheffran, & Weinzierl, 2011, 2012).

Resource scarcities and erratic rainfall play a prominent role in the region's frequent communal conflicts between Boran, Gabra, Pokot, Samburu, Turkana and other pastoralist groups (Wallenstein & Themnér, 2012). For one part, climate-induced spatial adjustments of herders often lead to territorial contention and competition over grazing resources between neighbouring groups. In the absence of effective regulations such disputes can become violent. Not only is the relationship between overlapping customary and formal land legislation ambiguous, but confusion also arises from the coexistence of different land registration laws in Kenya, leaving room for diverging interpretations and manipulation (Krätli & Swift, 2001; Lengoiboni, 2011; Mureithi & Opiyo, 2010).

For the other part, the harsh ecology of northern Kenya has rendered violent livestock raiding not only a viable but also culturally accepted practice among pastoralist communities. Livestock is crucial to the survival and livelihoods of pastoralists as a source of food and cash revenue, but also as a symbol of prestige and prosperity. Animals serve as bridewealth and are exchanged among pastoralists with the purpose of broadening and intensifying social networks of mutual insurance in case of unforeseen events such as drought and disease (Bollig, 1993; McCabe, 1990; Omolo, 2010: 90). They further allow the settlement of disputes as a means of compensation (Schilling et al., 2012: 2). Hence, armed raids against other pastoralist groups are considered a strategy to cope with the dire living conditions of ASAL. Livestock thus obtained compensates for the loss of animals to drought, disease and theft (Krätli & Swift, 2001: 22; Witsenburg & Adano, 2002: 13). Over the last centuries, customary institutions have evolved in northern Kenya, which define under what circumstances raids are legitimate, how stolen animals are redistributed and how resulting hostilities between different groups can be settled through compensation (Hendrickson, Mearns, & Armon, 1996; Meier et al., 2007).

Previous research also shows that pastoralist violence in northern Kenya is closely related to specific ecological patterns, which provide armed herders with situational opportunities for livestock raiding. Heavy rains during the wet season wash away the tracks of stolen animals and make it easier for raiders to escape,

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