

Drought, Famine and Conflict: The Case of Two Pastoral Ethnic Communities in Turkana, Kenya

Hye-Sung Kim

Assistant Professor

kimh@winthrop.edu

Department of Political Science

Abstract

The interethnic conflict between the Turkana and Pokot ethnic groups in Turkana County has been a long lasting one. It has displaced thousands of individuals to and further restrained access to already scarce resources such as cattle, razing and water.

Until recently, there was no consensus regarding the causes of the Pokot-Turkana inter-ethnic conflict. Some argue that competition over cattle, the primary source of wealth in these pastoral communities, is the main cause of the conflict, while others suggest that war-promoting institutional and cultural practices of the region are the primary determinant. Some attribute the discovery of oil in 2012 to the onset of inter-ethnic conflict. Identifying the causes of the Pokot-Turkana conflict is critically important because only the accurate identification of the causes can help us design effective policy interventions to reduce the conflict onsets.

In this paper, I examine the link between drought and pastoral conflicts between two ethnic communities in Turkana. I argue that the famine caused by extreme drought does not have a direct effect on ethnic-conflicts between the two communities; rather, the two communities fight for cattle as cattle is not only a means to produce food through pastoral farming but is a primary currency used to buy and sell assets and commodities in Turkana. Evidence suggests that providing food aid under conditions of extreme drought and famine was not effective in mitigating conflicts in the region, suggesting food scarcity does not have a direct link with the conflicts in the region. I empirically test the “cattle as commodity” hypothesis by using fine-grained conflict data that records all conflict episodes in the region and daily rainfall data.

Keywords: Food Scarcity, Drought, Ethnic Conflict, Cattle, Turkana, Kenya