



A young Dinka protecting his family's Zebu cattle against cattle raiders with an AK-47 rifle.

Photos: J. Boethling

Pastoralism and conflict – two sides of a coin?

Pastoralism – the predominant form of livestock keeping in the Horn of Africa – has always been a source of disputes and tensions in the region. So it is maybe no coincidence that precisely those countries with the largest cattle and camel herds should be the ones that have been suffering from prolonged armed conflict for years. This article takes a look at the closely interwoven aspects influencing conflicts in the Horn of Africa in general and South Sudan more specifically.

More than 20 million people live as nomadic pastoralists in the Horn of Africa. Pastoralism is a form of animal husbandry that is ideally suited to the dry, desert-like climate and has proved its worth in these areas for centuries. However, this traditional mode of life is becoming increasingly endangered by a wide range of developments. Moreover, owing to political marginalisation and poor accessibility, pastoralists often belong to the poorest sections of the population. Their situation is aggravated by armed conflicts that have become more frequent over the last few years.

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■ The dispute over the natural resources

The link between pastoralist livelihoods and potential conflict over natural resources in particular is multi-layered. More than ever, secure access to grazing land and water facilities has become one of the main causes for tension in the Horn of Africa during the last decade. As pastoralism is the predominant form of livestock keeping, this entails a varying degree of mobility for the search of adequate pastures and access to water. In regions where access to grazing areas is increasingly restricted due to e.g. the extension of agricultural land, urbanisation or conservation areas, the use of land by pastoralists can cause severe tensions. Basically, the relationship between nomads and sedentary farmers is of a more symbiotic nature. After all, the droppings of the herds act as fertiliser for the already harvested fields. And the animals can feed on the crop residues. But where this temporal co-

incidence is not given because, for example, arable land is developing in what used to be pastureland, livestock is increasingly driven onto fields that have not yet been harvested.

The primary causes of disputes or tensions between pastoralists (and also between farmers and pastoralists) are access to water points/grazing land, stock theft and livestock trespass. Aggravating factors such as increasing climate variability/droughts, population growth, increasing poverty, but also tribal conflicts and the closure of stock routes or dry season pastures due to conflict or infrastructure development as well as the proliferation of automatic weapons have led to an escalation of conflict dynamics in the last few years.

■ From “redistributive” to “predatory” raiding

Also, some observers argue, there is a breakdown of the community

spirit, or reciprocity, between clans and tribes. In the past, traditional pastoral conflict was termed “redistributive raiding”, and was subjected to strict rules (for instance, the killing of or violence against women and children was widely condemned). It was also predictable to some extent (e.g. restocking after droughts, a distinct situation between two clans). There was a degree of ritualisation involved in raiding; it had the blessing of the whole community, and elders would mediate or supervise the conflict. This, however, has changed in the last years, and “predatory raiding” orchestrated by individuals with criminal political or commercial intent is on the increase. Politically motivated conflict includes the killing of farmers, livestock owners or women and children, with no attempt at actually stealing or targeting livestock herds.

The effects of the conflicts on livestock and livestock owners are multiple and can entail direct loss/injury of livestock through looting or a “burnt earth policy”. The limited access to water and food, and crowding of livestock in secure areas leads to a decreasing health status and weakening of the animals. Loss of animals, their livestock products, decreased mobility as well as, often, a loss of family members directly impacts on the livelihoods of affected people, with women often being disproportionately more affected.

In countries where national conflicts directly influence conflict dynamics at regional level, issues get increasingly complex – as for example in South Sudan.

■ A broken dream?

It is just a few years ago that rejoicing crowds of people took to the streets of Juba to celebrate the birth of the world’s youngest nation. On the 9th July 2011, South Sudan gained independence, following decades of civil war. Almost three years on, the country is on the brink of a humanitarian disaster. The background to this is a vicious circle of inter-ethnic

violence and brutal violations of human rights that started as a political power play between President Salva Kiir and former Vice-President Riek Machar. The conflict refuelled rivalries between the two largest ethnic groups in the country – Salva Kiir is from the Dinka, whereas Riek Machar belongs to the Nuer. As a result, according to figures released by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 1.5 million people are fleeing the conflict – either in the country itself, or they have sought refuge in neighbouring countries. Unrest has led to cropland no longer being tilled and pillaging of stored harvests. The UNHCR states that around 3.5 million people are now facing crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity; there are fears of a famine.

■ Livestock – a precious resource

With a population of approx. 8.2 million people and an estimated 30 million cattle, goats and sheep, South Sudan, a country nearly double the size of Germany, is among the regions with the greatest abundance of livestock. With an average 25 animals per capita, the country also has the largest livestock per capita ratio in Africa. More than 85 per cent of the population keep livestock. The vast majority of them are pastoralists, moving around the country in search of suitable pastureland depending on the season, and using traditional routes.

In this East African country, cattle play a key role in society. They provide social security, “money on hooves”, are demanded as a dowry and are sacrificed during traditional rituals. The greater the herd, the more social prestige people enjoy. The animals are only slaughtered in emergencies or on special occasions, and unlike in other societies, desired breeding success is not oriented on the milk yield of animals but on the shape of the horns and the fur colour. At initiation, young Dinka men receive a bull that they care for and decorate and remain close to all its life. The name the

young men are given after initiation refers to the fur of their bull. When cattle have acquired such a high cultural status, they become the cause of disputes and conflicts as well. This also includes the widespread custom of cattle rustling – which now unfortunately often ends in bloodshed because of the widespread availability of rapid-fire weapons. In addition, in some areas, mounting overgrazing is resulting in disputes over the valuable pastureland. However, it has to be mentioned that cattle do also play an important role in settling conflicts, for example as compensatory or deficiency payments.

The frontier drawn in 2011 crosses one of the most fertile and much sought regions of Sudan. It also cut through traditional routes of pastoral peoples. During the dry period, which lasts for several months, nomads from Arab tribes come from the north down to the southern pastures that get up to 600 mm of rain a year (in contrast with the 150 mm in the dry north). The Misseriyas’ annual dry season migration alone takes some 50,000 herders and 1.2 million cattle from South Kordofan as far as Unity and Warrap states in South Sudan. But insecurity and conflicts have hindered the migration of cattle south, resulting in concentrations of livestock in border states and in some states to the north. Without adequate access to forage and water, pastoralists are forced to encroach on agricultural land, fuelling conflicts with affected farmers. The areas north of the border now are subject to severe overgrazing – and even an improvement of rangeland management practices to vertically enhance productivity of the grazing lands will not be enough to compensate for the lost areas. Only recently has the importance of livestock migration corridors been acknowledged. In the Blue Nile State of the Republic of Sudan for example, a demarcation and compensation process led to the re-opening of 109 km of livestock corridor in late 2013. The government, however, does not recognise the demarcations officially, and in some parts of the corridor, fees are demanded.

■ Jonglei is getting no peace

Jonglei is the largest South Sudanese state in the East of the country, and also one of its least developed. There are hardly more than 100 km of tarmac roads; during the rainy season, this remote area, with the provincial capital of Pibor, is completely inaccessible by land. During the last few years, Jonglei has again and again witnessed interethnic violence. In 2012, the Lou Nuer committed a massacre of the Murle tribe in which more than 3,000 people are said to have been killed. The reason for this was stolen cattle.

Hostilities that often already exist between the ethnic groups are being aggravated by political power struggles between the elites. This is also particularly the case between the Lou Nuer and the Dinka. Since both ethnic groups are agropastoralists, with a major share of the people earning their living with animal husbandry, destroying this basis as a strategy for the hostile groups to attack one another is, unfortunately, the order of the day. So cattle and pastoral structures are closely intermeshed with the dynamics of conflict. While they are often not the cause of conflicts, they do trigger recurrent hostilities. Additionally complicating factors include poor trust in justice mechanisms and local administration, poor infrastructure, food insecurity and inadequate access to water.

There can be no sustainable political solution to the conflict between Sudan and South Sudan as well as to the conflict within South Sudan without accommodating a viable future for pastoralists. And this is precisely what the activities of the organisation *Vétérinaires Sans Frontières Germany (VSFG)* set out from.

■ What is part of the problem is also part of the solution – the work of VSFG

Vétérinaires Sans Frontières Germany (VSFG) has been involved in projects in South Sudan and Sudan for more than 20 years – in the fields of animal health as well as in food security and

peace building. Here, the organisation is supporting families and refugees affected by the civil war with direct and indirect animal health measures.

Animal health can be a crucial factor in conflict developments. If the animals die, it is not only the lives of people depending on them that are threatened. Another consequence is an increased incidence of livestock thefts, which in turn can further aggravate the conflict. Animal stocks in the region that have already been strongly decimated by the hostilities therefore need to be restored in order to strengthen the livelihoods of the people depending on animal husbandry, but also to counter renewed cycles of cattle rustling.

In a current project, VSFG has the opportunity to operate in the districts of Bor and Pibor in Jonglei, both of which are strongly affected by the civil war. Here, the association can draw on a network of former staff and animal health assistants that was previously developed over a number of years to thus reach out to people in remote areas as well. The planned measures include vaccinations and deworming as well as the training of Community

Animal Health Workers (CAHWs), who are provided with a basic kit of medications and can treat the most common illnesses. The measures are to effectively support animal health and thus significantly reduce the mortality rate.

Thanks to the holistic approach applied in animal health and peace building, VSFG has already been able to achieve good results in other projects. For example, the association played a crucial role in the peace negotiations between various Dinka clans in Warap State. A major conference was attended both by the Commissioners of three Counties and representatives of the Chiefs engaged in efforts to settle conflicts at state level, as well as by military officials and politicians. For the first time, young warriors had also been invited who live in the cattle camps and are responsible for livestock thefts. They have repeatedly questioned the authority of the traditional Chiefs. Young and old, respected women were present, too. Together, they called for an end to all hostilities, chanting their slogan “Akac akac” – “enough is enough”.

For more information: > www.vsfg.org

Celebrating together after signing the peace treaty.



Photo: VSFG