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Stabilising the North Rift: Lessons learned from the peacebuilding experience of NCIC and Interpeace

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Executive summary

Recent months have seen a significant deterioration of the security situation in the North Rift region, notably in parts of Baringo, Elgeyo Marakwet, Laikipia, Samburu, Turkana, and West Pokot counties. This has prompted the government to announce a heavy-handed police-led operation and a dusk-to-dawn curfew jointly with the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF).

The situation today stands in contrast to the relative stability experienced between 2019 and 2021, which in large part was made possible by the brokering of ceasefire agreements between communities with long-standing grievances. These agreements remain in place, and communities continue to work together to recover livestock and address security incidents. The current rise of insecurity in large parts of the region resembles violent crime more than inter-communal conflict. Armed groups of youth are carrying out raids that often appear to have political or economic motivations.

The underlying drivers of insecurity in the North Rift are complex and interconnected. A long history of marginalisation and experience of violence has entrenched deep-seated mistrust of the government and fuelled the conviction that communities must provide for their own security. Lack of trust also characterises relations between communities, whose interactions have been dominated by violent clashes for many years. Cycles of revenge attacks are often connected to livestock raids, which have changed from a cultural to a primarily commercial practice. Young men are particularly likely to engage in such raids because socio-cultural norms encourage their engagement in violence and because they lack conventional economic alternatives. Climate change exacerbates this dynamic, as it undermines the viability of pastoral livelihoods and lifestyles. Since communities with profound grievances rely on the same, increasingly scarce, water points and pasture areas, climate change is also a cause of violent encounters. Such clashes are intensified by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW), which are widely available due to porous borders and years of armed conflict in neighbouring countries.

Given these challenges, the 'hard' security approach announced by the government is unlikely to succeed. While they may stabilise the situation in the short term, disarmament exercises are doomed to fail if the underlying motivations for owning weapons are not addressed and include protection of community safety and livelihoods. Indeed, militarised interventions are likely to exacerbate underlying conflict drivers by entrenching resentment of the State. The security operation should therefore avoid excessive use of force at all costs and focus on building trust with communities and responding effectively and promptly to reports and warnings of violent incidents. These efforts should be embedded in a holistic approach that emphasises partnership, bridges silos, prioritises the economic development of the North Rift, reduces the exposure of communities to climate change, and deepens trust-building and peace processes between communities.

1. Background

After an extended period of relative peace, during much of 2019 and all of 2021, the security situation in the North Rift region deteriorated significantly, notably in parts of Baringo, Elgeyo Marakwet, Samburu, Turkana, West Pokot, and Laikipia counties. One hundred and fifteen civilians and twenty police officers lost their lives in the last seven months, according to government figures. The most notable incidents included the burning of Napeitom village in Turkana East on 1 August 2022, which resulted in the deaths of eight people, and the killing of eight police officers, a local chief, and two civilians in a related attack on 24 September 2022, during an attempt to recover stolen livestock. On 10 February 2023, a multi-agency security convoy was attacked by an armed group on the Kitale-Lodwar highway, resulting in the death of three police officers. This attack occurred just after the Interior Cabinet Secretary, Professor Kithure Kindiki, had finished a tour of the North Rift, during which he announced a government crackdown on banditry in the region. Following this attack, the government ordered a police-led operation in the North Rift region, supported by the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF); it offered a three-day amnesty to all those who surrendered their firearms and announced a 30-day dusk-to-dawn curfew in the affected counties. On 12 March, the government further ordered residents living in certain areas of the North Rift to vacate within 24 hours. Violent livestock raids and attacks against security agencies have nevertheless continued to rise since the beginning of the security operation.

Despite the current surge in violence, the situation today does not resemble the situation before 2020, when, for example, the Kapedo-Lomelo corridor in the Suguta Valley was virtually inaccessible due to intense inter-communal conflict. In large part, the improvements that have occurred are due to joint interventions by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) and Interpeace. Key achievements included brokering peace agreements between the Turkana and Samburu at Baragoi in September 2020 and the Pokot and Turkana at Orwa in July 2021. Despite several recent incidents between members of these communities, these agreements still hold. Communities continue to dialogue, and elders continue to work together to respond to incidents and recover livestock. Indeed, it can be said that the current insecurity in the North Rift appears to resemble violent crime rather than inter-communal conflict. Many of the incidents are carried out by armed groups of youth and seem to be organised by local elites to serve their political and commercial interests. This shift is illustrated by reports that Pokot and Turkana youths have collaborated to raid their own communities in the Turkwel Belt between West Pokot and Turkana counties.

In the light of recent developments in the North Rift and the unintended risks associated with a heavy-handed government response, this Policy Brief sets out recommendations on achieving sustainable peace in the region. It draws on what NCIC and Interpeace have learned during their joint work in the North Rift and other parts of Northern Kenya, as well as Interpeace's long experience of peacebuilding worldwide.

2. Key conflict drivers

The recent incidents in the North Rift are embedded in a historical pattern of recurring cyclical conflict between communities, as well as between communities and security forces. NCIC and Interpeace conducted an extensive, participatory research exercise in 2019 to better understand communities' perceptions of the main conflict drivers in the region.¹ Based on its findings and their engagement in the North Rift, NCIC and Interpeace believe the following interconnected factors help to explain the current insecurity:

- 1. Mistrust between pastoral communities and the government** is deeply rooted. It is anchored in the historical marginalisation and neglect of Northern Kenya's communities, reflected, for instance, in the 'closed district' policy of the colonial administration and post-independence Kenya. Interactions between the North Rift's communities and security actors have historically been dominated by experiences of violence, while the perceived inaction of security agencies continues to fuel the impression that communities are left to ensure their security themselves. Early warning information is regularly shared by forums of community members, elders, chiefs, leaders, and security agencies but the response to these alerts is often ineffective or slow.
- 2. Mistrust** characterises the vertical relationship between the State and society, but also horizontal relations between different communities. Longstanding cycles of revenge attacks have entrenched **inter-communal animosity** that is passed down from generation to generation. Because interactions between communities have largely been limited to violent clashes, each community tends to dehumanise the 'other', which is assumed to pose an existential or security threat. Peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts have received **insufficient attention from the political leadership** in all the North Rift counties, further reducing interaction and dialogue between communities. Especially in election periods, some political leaders have instigated inter-communal clashes to promote their agendas.
- 3. Escalatory cycles of revenge** are frequently connected to **livestock raids**. Animal theft prompts retaliatory and often deadly raids against members of the community that is believed to be responsible. Historically, raids followed a logic of restocking. They were regulated by community rules and instructed by elders, giving these authorities far-reaching influence in resolving conflicts and reaching peace agreements. Recently, however, raiding has transformed. It is increasingly a form of commercially organised crime. Raids often involve groups of young men and are incited by local leaders and external actors to promote their political and economic interests, notably in the lucrative meat industry. Elders have only limited influence over these types of raids, which has **eroded traditional conflict resolution mechanisms**.
- 4. The participation of young men in violent livestock raiding** is intimately connected to the **lack of alternative livelihood opportunities** in the North Rift. High levels of unemployment and scarce economic opportunities lead many young men to engage in cattle rustling to earn a living and acquire the wealth they need, for instance, to pay dowries and be able to marry. Young women also have limited livelihood and educational opportunities, encouraging them to engage in maladaptive income strategies, such as brewing alcohol ('chang'a') or charcoal burning. Economic hardship, the lack of basic social amenities, and the absence of meaningful opportunities to participate in politics, have led to an increase in illicit alcohol consumption, especially

¹ <https://www.interpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/North-Rift-Regional-Note-Web.pdf>.

among young men. This consumption is frequently financed by commercialised raids. Young men under the influence of alcohol have reportedly been responsible for incidents of violence and killings.

5. These livelihood-related dynamics demonstrate that conflicts in the North Rift have a clear **gender and youth dimension**. Beyond socio-economic pressures that encourage engagement in violence, young men in particular are exposed to socio-cultural norms that promote violence. From a young age, boys are socialised into masculine ideals that celebrate behaviours and roles associated with warrior prowess. These norms are reinforced by the ascribed gender roles of women and girls, who often encourage young men to raid. Because they are generally responsible for looking after the household and herding goats, women and young children are also particularly vulnerable to raids.
6. The **impacts of climate change** accentuate the lack of economic alternatives to pastoralism. Droughts are increasingly frequent and protracted. They undermine the viability of pastoral livelihoods and lifestyles, increasing the economic incentives for raiding. Current drought conditions have also exacerbated conflict dynamics by decreasing the number of reserve areas and water points. Members of communities with long-standing grievances increasingly depend on the same locations for water and grazing, disagreements over use and access sometimes triggering violent clashes. The migration of members of the Pokot community into the Suguta Valley is an important case in point. It has created pressure on the area's residents and significantly increased the number of violent incidents.
7. Violent livestock raids and conflicts over natural resources are intensified by the **proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW)**. It has become a norm for pastoralists in the region to possess firearms to protect their families and livestock or to engage in illicit income-generating activities. Due to porous borders and years of armed conflict in the neighbouring countries of South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Uganda, SALW are easily available. In some cases, communities have conspired to obtain these weapons from security agencies. **Past disarmament exercises have created the fear that those who surrender their arms will be left vulnerable** to attacks by groups that have retained their weapons, once the security presence declines.
8. As in most pastoralist communities in Kenya, security in large parts of the North Rift is primarily provided by the National Police Reserve (NPR), whose officers are recruited from communities and armed by the government. Despite their importance for community security, **the NPR faces significant challenges**. It lacks resources and support, is poorly supervised and managed, and under-coordinated. This has undermined the NPR's effectiveness and, in some instances, contributed to misuse of NPR weapons for raids. **The government's recent decision to redeploy NPRs has heightened tensions** in the region, because it has fuelled perceptions of partiality. Many people believe that the government arms and supports some communities at the expense of others.

3. Lessons learned

Interpeace has implemented peacebuilding initiatives across the world since 1994 and started working in Kenya in 2016 in partnership with NCIC. Since 2019 the two institutions have succeeded in largely stopping inter-communal violence in Mandera, significantly reducing violence in Wajir, and halting violence to some extent in parts of the North Rift. The following lessons were learned from these experiences and remain very relevant for the region.

3.1 Building relations between communities and security actors

‘Hard’ security approaches to stabilisation that aim to combat armed groups and forcefully disarm their members can only have limited impact. The communities of the North Rift are largely unwilling to disarm, because, among other reasons, they mistrust the security agencies and believe that communities have been left to provide their own security. Past disarmament exercises have also led to the belief that people who surrender their arms become vulnerable to attack by people who do not. **Disarmament exercises are therefore unlikely to succeed in the long run unless accompanied by a shift in mindset.** Communities need to be persuaded that, if they voluntarily surrender their weapons, they will be protected.

To bring about this change, it is essential to **address the lack of trust between communities and security agencies.** This requires mechanisms that improve accountability and collaboration. For instance, forums of engagement might be established in which participants jointly identify sources of distrust and safety concerns and design and implement appropriate solutions. In Ethiopia, Interpeace enhanced trust between communities and the police by introducing SARA (Scan, Analyse, Respond, Assess), a model of problem-solving policing. After geolocating reports of incidents, the police and community members jointly identify community safety patterns, enabling the police to prioritise their interventions and jointly implement and evaluate them.

‘Hard’ security approaches can indeed play an important role in creating conditions for peace. By freezing conflicts, they can create an opportunity for communities to come together. A positive example is the security operation in Marsabit in 2022. This stopped almost daily killings and enabled the Gabra and Borana communities to agree to cease hostilities. In the absence of meaningful trust-building measures, however, **military operations may prove counter-effective** by intensifying and further entrenching historical antagonism between communities and security actors.

3.2 Addressing inter-communal conflicts

Fostering communities’ willingness to disarm also requires addressing the protracted inter-communal conflicts in the North Rift. NCIC and Interpeace’s successes in Kenya demonstrate that durable peace agreements are possible if **real ownership is placed in the communities affected by violence.** Rather than convene negotiations between elites in the capital, the NCIC-Interpeace team directly involves communities, promoting grassroots consensus and commitment to cease hostilities. The implementation mechanisms built into the agreements further contribute to their resilience. **Community-led peace infrastructures**, composed of legitimate representatives from both communities, sustain such agreements by responding to incidents and preventing vi-

olence from escalating, and spreading information about the peace agreement throughout the communities. Examples of community-led peace infrastructures include ceasefire monitoring committees, inter-village dialogue spaces in key conflict hotspots, and early warning and early response forums for information sharing. To address cyclical intercommunal conflicts, it is vital to involve all stakeholders, including women and youth.

To roll this approach out effectively, **long-term commitment and a permanent field presence** are essential. Brokering peace agreements takes time, and community-led peace infrastructures require continuous support after their establishment. These efforts need to be led by an inclusive team composed of members of all the affected communities to ensure that understanding of the local context is granular and to strengthen community ownership. The importance of this type of long-term engagement is illustrated by the ‘Orwa I Peace Accord’ between the Pokot and Turkana along the Kapedo corridor in the Suguta Valley, which was brokered by NCIC and Interpeace in July 2021. The peace agreement brought about a gradual resumption of normalcy and a significant reduction of violence, in contrast to numerous past agreements that failed because they could not be implemented or effectively communicated to local communities. However, a funding gap in the first half of 2022 forced the programme to suspend its support for peace infrastructures. While the agreement between the communities holds, this obstructed its dissemination, including to the armed groups of youth that are largely responsible for the current violence. It also hampered the efforts of community leaders to respond rapidly to incidents and prevent retaliation.

3.3 Addressing mental health and trauma

Beyond the mere cessation of hostilities, rebuilding trust between communities requires long-term efforts to address deeply entrenched historical grievances and strengthen social cohesion. Those living in the North Rift have been exposed to direct or indirect experiences of violence for much of their lives. Such persistent violence over generations hampers peacebuilding and development efforts. Interpeace has therefore developed innovative group-based **mental health and psychosocial support** protocols that maximise the efficiency of the region’s very limited mental health infrastructures.

The violence and its consequences have traumatised people in the North Rift. They do not have access to any form of psychological support; victims deal with their trauma alone or with the support of their immediate families. In addition, the widespread and sporadic nature of attacks, and their persistence, has normalised violence. No official studies have assessed the prevalence of mental ill health in the North Rift, but the WHO has estimated that 22% of people living in areas of conflict have a mental health condition. Exposure to violence and consequent mental ill health, such as anxiety and depression, can prevent people from engaging in productive economic activities and participating socially, including in peace or reconciliation processes, in part because people have become significantly less able to trust others. They may also engage in aggressive and violent behaviour, including self-destructive behaviour, such as substance abuse.

3.4 Peace-responsive development efforts

In Kenya’s arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs), including the North Rift, there is a vicious circle between **insecurity and underdevelopment** and the same holds true for the relation between conflict and vulnerability to climate change. While the interactions between climate change and conflict are complex and context-specific, climate-induced scarcity in the North Rift has exacerbated conflict because pastoral communities with deep-seated grievances converge around shrinking sources of water and pasture. Coupled with the general lack of economic alternatives, the decreasing viability of pastoral livelihoods drives some individuals to engage in violent behaviour to make a living. The resulting conflicts do further harm to economic development and recovery efforts, and reduce communities’ resilience to the impacts of climate change by obstructing resource sharing and fuelling unsustainable land use.

To build peaceful and resilient societies, a holistic approach that includes a variety of actors and approaches is necessary. Dialogue and trust-building can create the preconditions for development and resilience interventions. However, peacebuilding work needs to be buttressed by **technical programming that is deliberately designed to enhance the peace gains** achieved – a concept that Interpeace terms **peace responsiveness**. To operationalise this approach, strong partnerships between peacebuilders, governments, and development actors are required that enable technical programmes to increase their contextual awareness and adapt to realities, relationships, and capacities on the ground.

3.5 Inclusion and gender and youth sensitivity

Given the inherently gendered nature of conflicts, including in the North Rift, **integrating a gender and youth lens** is vital, both to develop comprehensive strategies that will foster sustainable peace and to harness the potential of youth and women to promote peace. Gender norms and age influence the involvement of people in violent conflict, but also shape the resilience capacities of individuals and groups, and how they engage in peace processes. Importantly, patriarchal norms severely limit the opportunities of youth and women to participate in peace processes. To ensure that the opinions of women and youth are captured and amplified, it is therefore important to create safe spaces in which these groups can describe their vulnerabilities and wishes, and to meaningfully include them in community peace structures.

When doing this, it is essential to **avoid going against communities' endogenous decision-making and conflict resolution practices**. The Ceasefire Monitoring Committees, for instance, are composed of respected male elders from conflicting groups who have the moral authority required to spread messages of peace and address the effects of violence, for example, by negotiating the return of stolen animals. Prevalent socio-cultural norms mean that merely including women and youth in such structures will not secure their *meaningful* participation. Instead, Interpeace encourages **engagement with women and youth associations, and building their capacity**, so that they and their ideas can be incorporated in ways that make sense culturally and build on what already exist. A good example is the PoTuMA (Pokot, Turkana and Marakwet) women's forum, an umbrella organisation that brings together women leaders from the three communities. The forum has played an important role in promoting peace messages, sharing experience, and encouraging peaceful coexistence. While there is no equivalent youth organisation (the formation of which should be encouraged), grazing committees exist in all the main conflict corridors of the North Rift. These committees are generally created and endorsed by elders, but on the ground they are fully managed by youth from different ethnicities. They prevent violent clashes over pasture, and in many places they are successful.

4. Recommendations

Based on an extensive participatory research exercise that NCIC and Interpeace conducted in 2019 and their ongoing engagement in the North Rift and elsewhere, this Policy Brief has identified several recommendations, grouped in social, security-related, political, economic and environmental categories. If these recommendations are implemented, they will help to sustainably address the complex and interconnected drivers of cyclical conflict in the region.

4.1 Security

- **Ensure rapid response to security incidents.** Early warning information should be swiftly validated and acted on. Effectiveness and response times can be improved by strengthening early warning and early response systems and by providing adequate resources and training to deployed officers. Increasing community safety will build trust in the government and confidence in the disarmament process.
- **Avoid punitive measures.** While security agencies should arrest and bring to justice perpetrators of violence, disproportionate use of force and measures that target whole communities tend to deepen mistrust and resentment of the government. Such actions should be avoided at all costs.
- **Provide adequate support to the National Police Reserve (NPR).** To enable officers to deliver security effectively and avoid misuse of authority, the government should prioritise the training and supervision of officers and consider paying monthly allowances. Officers should be recruited equally from all communities to avoid exacerbating tensions and creating perceptions of partiality.
- **Enhance the cultural awareness of security officers.** Officers deployed to the North Rift are often unaware of local cultural practices and norms. Relations with communities can be improved by providing pre-deployment orientation training to improve understanding of the region's complex social fabric.

4.2 Social

- **Build trust between communities and security actors.** Forums for engagement and collaboration with communities should be at the centre of the government's efforts. They will help to gradually shift mindsets and create conditions for disarmament by persuading communities that their safety will be ensured when they no longer possess weapons. By generating community insights, they will also strengthen operational effectiveness. Community policing and peace structures provide good entry points for engagement that should be strengthened and supported.
- **Continue support for community-driven peace processes.** NCIC's and Interpeace's approach, which engaged communities at grassroots level to foster consensus on the need for peace and collaboration, has had considerable initial success. However, peace agreements and community peace structures remain nascent. Continued engagement and support for communities is required to prevent fragile peace processes from being derailed by the current insecurity.

- **Include youth and women in community consultations, peace activities and peace structures.** Patriarchal cultural norms generally give youth and women few opportunities to participate in peace processes. However, they have distinct experiences, needs and aspirations that should be recognised, and should participate appropriately in peace processes, activities and forums. Their strengths are critical to the longevity and success of peace efforts.
- **Support provision of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS).** Victims, perpetrators, and wider communities should have access to contextually appropriate and community-driven MHPSS services. These have the potential to address the social impacts of historical grievances and break cycles of violence.

4.3 Political

- **Create an enabling environment for peacebuilding.** The government should develop policies and laws that promote peaceful coexistence and support community peace processes. Political leaders of the North Rift counties, in particular, should increase their support for such efforts. Leaders from different communities can create dialogue platforms between their communities to foster trust and demonstrate commitment to peace. Given the role of local elites in inciting violence, senior figures should exercise a moderating influence on these actors and condemn violence.
- **Promote a regional approach to disarmament.** To address the proliferation of SALW, coordination and collaboration between the four countries of the Karamoja Cluster are essential. Due to porous borders and cross-boundary networks, disarmament exercises cannot be effective if they are undertaken by one country alone; indeed, they may make some communities even more vulnerable to attack by neighbouring groups.

4.4 Economic

- **Diversify economic opportunities, especially for youth.** To remove economic incentives to engage in violence, it will be necessary to scale up investment in alternative livelihoods and youth employment programmes. Potential focus sectors include crop farming, agroforestry, tourism, and small-scale business. Improving economic opportunities will also make disarmament efforts more sustainable by addressing a key argument for owning firearms, that they provide a living.
- **Integrate a peace lens into development efforts.** To ensure that development efforts do not exacerbate conflicts and positively strengthen social cohesion, technical programmes need to be deliberately peace-responsive. Building partnerships between the government, international partners, development actors, and peacebuilding organisations is key to achieving this.

4.5 Environmental

- **Strengthen drought-resistant infrastructure.** Investment in dams, boreholes, and irrigation systems is required to ensure that communities have access to water and pasture during dry spells. Designing such measures in a peace-responsive way will help to reduce conflicts triggered by disagreements over access to and use of water points and pasture in times of drought. The government should also provide support to communities to enable them to preserve their natural resources and adopt sustainable land-use practices.



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