

The Relationship Between Cross-Border Conflicts and Food Security in Narok County, Kenya

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Abstract

This research investigates the relationship between cross-border conflicts and food security in Narok County, Kenya, with a specific objective of understanding the nature of cross-border conflict and its impact and evaluating mitigation actions for food security. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 160 participants, including residents and administrative officers, through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The study identifies three primary conflict drivers: land disputes, resource competition, and cultural tensions, which collectively disrupt food systems. These conflicts significantly impact food availability, access, and quality, further destabilising local food markets and increasing the vulnerability of the county's population to food insecurity. The research also evaluates the effectiveness of ongoing mitigation efforts, such as the Maasai Livelihood Support Initiative and the Water Harvesting and Irrigation Scheme, in addressing food security challenges in conflict-prone areas. While these programs have shown positive results, the study identifies key challenges to long-term success, including a lack of sustainable solutions, limited community involvement, inconsistent funding, and fragile trust in local authorities. The findings emphasise the need for an integrated approach to conflict resolution and food security. Recommendations include addressing the root causes of conflicts through legal reforms and land management policies, improving food production and market access infrastructure, and increasing community participation in program design and implementation. Additionally, enhancing communication and transparency between authorities and local populations is crucial for fostering trust and ensuring the sustainability of interventions. The study advocates for a community-driven, holistic approach to developing resilient food systems that can withstand the pressures of cross-border conflicts.

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Introduction

Food security is a critical global challenge influenced by various factors, including cross-border conflicts. At the international level, conflicts often disrupt agricultural production, supply chains, and trade, affecting food availability and accessibility. Organisations such as the United Nations and the World Food Programme have highlighted the cascading effects of global conflicts on food systems, especially in vulnerable regions (Canton, 2021). At the regional level, Africa faces significant challenges in addressing food security due to persistent cross-border tensions. These conflicts often exacerbate displacement, resource competition, and trade barriers, particularly affecting the East African region. Institutions like the African Union and regional bodies have emphasised the need for cooperative approaches to mitigate these impacts (Citaristi, 2022).

Nationally, Kenya grapples with food insecurity in the context of inter-communal and cross-border disputes. Regions like Narok County, situated near porous borders, are particularly vulnerable. These conflicts strain local food systems and hinder broader national efforts to achieve sustainable food security. This research explores the intricate relationship between cross-border conflicts and Narok County, Kenya's food security. In this region, socio-political and economic tensions have persistently disrupted the stability of local food systems. Narok County, located along Kenya's southern border with Tanzania, is home to diverse ethnic communities, primarily pastoralist groups such as the Maasai (Canton, 2021). These communities have long relied on agriculture and livestock for their livelihoods. However, historical land disputes, resource competition, and cultural tensions have made the region highly susceptible to conflict. Cross-border conflicts in Narok are driven by multiple factors, including population pressure, unsustainable land use practices, and climate-induced resource scarcity, exacerbating tensions over access to grazing land and water.

These conflicts disrupt daily life and have profound and far-reaching consequences on food security. Food security, as defined by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), encompasses four dimensions: availability, access, utilisation, and stability (Egger et al., 2021). In Narok County, cross-border conflicts have impacted each of these dimensions, leading to food shortages, restricted market access, and displacement of local populations (Citaristi, 2022). Agriculture, the backbone of the region's economy, is particularly vulnerable to the effects of these conflicts, as disputes over land use and access to critical natural resources directly undermine food production. With diminished food availability and disrupted supply chains, residents face increased vulnerability to food insecurity. Displacement due to conflict further exacerbates this issue,

depriving families of their agricultural livelihoods and limiting their access to essential food supplies and markets.

This study aims to assess the nature and extent of cross-border conflicts in Narok County, understand how these conflicts influence key aspects of food security, and evaluate the effectiveness of current mitigation measures. Despite numerous interventions, such as food aid programs, community-based conflict resolution initiatives, and government-led policy frameworks, food insecurity remains a persistent issue in Narok. Programs aimed at mitigating conflict and enhancing food security have been met with mixed results, as the root causes of conflict—such as competition for land and water—have not been fully addressed. In addition, inconsistent funding, inadequate community participation, and weak governance have undermined the sustainability of these interventions (World Bank, 2020).

This research aims to comprehensively evaluate existing mitigation strategies, investigating why some efforts have succeeded while others have failed and how they can be improved to achieve long-term, sustainable food security in conflict-affected areas. By focusing on the dynamics of conflict and food insecurity in Narok County, this study sheds light on the complex interplay between socio-political instability and food systems in a region often overlooked in broader discussions of food insecurity in Kenya.

Furthermore, this study fills an essential gap in the existing literature by examining the complex interplay between conflict and food security, specifically in Narok County, a region often overlooked in broader discussions of food insecurity in Kenya. While substantial research has been conducted on food security in Kenya, Narok County has not adequately explored the role of recurring conflicts in exacerbating food scarcity and disrupting agricultural systems. Cross-border conflicts in this region have unique characteristics shaped by historical land ownership disputes, the movement of pastoralist communities, and the growing effects of climate change, which have further stressed the limited natural resources. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from household surveys and qualitative insights from key informant interviews to provide a holistic understanding of the challenges faced by residents. The research will assess the effectiveness of local and national initiatives, including land reform policies, water harvesting schemes, and community-driven conflict resolution programs, in addressing the intertwined conflict and food insecurity issues.

Theoretical Basis

The research on cross-border conflicts and food security in Narok County, Kenya, is grounded in Resource Conflict Theory, initially developed by Michael Ross and Jefferey Sachs and further expanded by Thomas Homer-Dixon in his work *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence* (1999). Resource Conflict Theory posits that competition over scarce resources—particularly in areas

marked by economic disparity—leads to tensions and conflict. This framework offers an essential lens through which the ongoing disputes over land and water resources in Narok County can be understood.

Resource Conflict Theory and its Application

Resource Conflict Theory's core is that when key resources such as land, water, or minerals are unequally distributed or exploited, competition increases, leading to conflict. In Narok County, where pastoralist communities depend heavily on land for livestock grazing, the rising pressures of population growth and land fragmentation have intensified competition for these resources (Homer-Dixon, 1999). Climate change exacerbates drought conditions and reduces available grazing land and water, further heightening this competition and increasing the likelihood of cross-border conflicts between communities. This aligns with Ross and Sachs' argument that environmental pressures and resource scarcity fuel social tensions, particularly in regions where governance structures are weak.

The theory also suggests that institutional inadequacies exacerbate tensions, such as weak land tenure systems and unclear resource boundaries. In Narok County, inadequate land management policies create ambiguities over land ownership and access to grazing areas, fostering conflict. Furthermore, political factors such as ethnic favouritism and resource capture by elites intensify these grievances, creating a breeding ground for sustained conflict (Maisori, 2021). The implications of Resource Conflict Theory extend beyond the immediate violence caused by competition for resources; it also highlights the economic and social consequences of such conflicts. In Narok County, recurrent clashes over land and water disrupt agricultural and livestock production, leading to food insecurity. Population displacement, combined with the destruction of assets such as livestock and farmland, perpetuates cycles of poverty and hunger, particularly among vulnerable groups who are heavily dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods.

Debates on Governance and Conflict Mitigation

Within resource conflict studies, there is ongoing debate regarding the role of governance in mitigating or exacerbating resource conflicts. Scholars like Homer-Dixon (1999) argue that weak governance structures, particularly regarding land tenure and resource management, create environments where conflicts are more likely to arise. This is evident in Narok County, where inadequate land policies and legal frameworks have left communities without clear land ownership rights, leading to disputes over resource allocation (Maisori, 2021).

On the other hand, some researchers advocate for stronger governance mechanisms to solve these conflicts. According to this perspective, effective governance can help clarify land ownership, create equitable resource-sharing agreements, and establish sustainable land management practices

that reduce resource competition. In the context of Narok County, such governance reforms would be essential for addressing the root causes of land and resource disputes, thereby mitigating the impact of conflict on food security.

Environmental Degradation and Climate Change

Another key aspect of the theoretical debate revolves around the role of environmental degradation and climate change in exacerbating resource conflicts. Scholars such as Sachs and Homer-Dixon emphasise that environmental stressors, including deforestation, soil erosion, and climate-induced changes in rainfall patterns, place additional pressure on already scarce resources, increasing the potential for conflict. In Narok County, the effects of climate change—such as prolonged droughts and unpredictable rainfall—have diminished the availability of arable land and water resources, intensifying competition among pastoralists (Homer-Dixon, 1999).

Environmental degradation further exacerbates this problem by undermining the ecological capacity of the land to support agricultural and livestock activities. Unsustainable land-use practices, such as overgrazing and deforestation, have led to significant soil erosion in parts of Narok County, reducing the overall productivity of the land and heightening tensions over its use (Maisori, 2021). As a result, food insecurity becomes more pronounced as agricultural output declines, reinforcing the cycles of conflict and resource scarcity.

Cultural Dimensions of Resource Conflict

Resource Conflict Theory also highlights the cultural and historical dimensions of land disputes. In Narok County, the Maasai and other local communities have deep cultural connections to their land, serving as an economic resource and a symbol of identity and autonomy (Maisori, 2021). Disputes over land ownership, therefore, take on broader significance, representing struggles for self-determination and cultural preservation. The loss of control over critical resources, such as grazing areas and water points, threatens not only the economic livelihoods of these communities but also their cultural identities and social cohesion.

The theory emphasises that addressing resource conflicts in culturally significant areas requires a sensitive approach to recognising these historical and cultural linkages. Equitable resource allocation and policies that protect cultural rights and promote inclusive land management practices are essential for resolving conflicts and ensuring long-term stability.

Food Security and Resource Conflict

The interplay between resource conflict and food security is a critical area of focus in this research. As noted, conflicts over land and water resources in Narok County directly affect food production.

When agricultural and livestock activities are disrupted by violence, food supply chains are weakened, resulting in higher levels of food insecurity. This is particularly concerning in regions like Narok, where pastoralism and agriculture are the primary means of subsistence. The displacement of people due to conflict not only results in the loss of livelihoods but also exacerbates poverty and hunger, perpetuating a cycle of deprivation that is difficult to break (Homer-Dixon, 1999).

Addressing the nexus between resource conflict and food security requires a multi-faceted approach. In addition to resolving land disputes through equitable governance, sustainable land management practices that enhance the resilience of food systems are essential. This includes implementing conflict-sensitive agricultural policies that promote food security while reducing competition for scarce resources (Ross & Sachs, 2002). In Narok County, sustainable practices such as improved water harvesting, reforestation, and rotational grazing could alleviate environmental pressure while promoting more equitable access to resources.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research approach integrating both qualitative and quantitative design to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of cross-border conflicts on food security in Narok County. Combining the strengths of both methods, the research captures statistical trends and the personal experiences and perceptions of individuals living in conflict-prone areas. A sample of 160 participants was selected using purposive sampling from a target population of 180 individuals, which ensured the inclusion of key individuals, such as residents, community leaders, and administrative officers, who are directly affected by or involved in managing the conflicts. This approach was chosen to obtain diverse perspectives from those most knowledgeable about the region's conflict and food security challenges.

Data were collected through two primary tools: structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The structured questionnaires were administered to a broad group of respondents to quantify their perceptions of food security, the frequency and type of conflicts, and their access to resources. These questionnaires were designed with closed-ended questions, allowing for the collection of measurable data that could be statistically analysed. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants such as local chiefs, agricultural officers, and community elders. These interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of personal experiences with conflict and food insecurity, offering rich qualitative insights that complemented the quantitative data. The interviews were designed to be flexible, enabling participants to share their experiences in their own words while focusing on specific themes related to the study's objectives.

Thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data collected from the interviews. This approach involved identifying recurring patterns or themes related to the types of conflicts, their impact on

food security, and the involvement of local communities in mitigation efforts. A systematic coding process identified key themes such as land disputes, resource competition, cultural tensions, and the effectiveness of conflict resolution programs. For the quantitative data, statistical techniques were employed to analyse the frequency and impact of conflicts on food security. Descriptive statistics, including percentages, means, and frequencies, were used to summarise the respondents' response rates, demographic profiles, and the types of conflicts experienced. The data were visually presented in tables and graphs for clear interpretation and comparison.

Findings and Analysis

Response Rate and Demographics

Of the 180 questionnaires distributed, 160 were completed and returned, resulting in an impressive response rate of 88.9%. The gender distribution of respondents was relatively balanced, with 53.3% identifying as male and 46.7% as female. The respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 65 years, with the largest age group being between 35-44 years (30.5%), indicating significant participation from a working-age population likely engaged in agricultural activities. This demographic distribution provided a broad perspective on the conflict and food security situation in Narok County.

Nature of Conflicts

The data collected reveal that the most common conflicts in Narok County are land disputes (34.3%) and resource competition (23.8%). These conflicts, particularly those related to land ownership and access, have emerged as significant contributors to food insecurity in the region. The displacement of communities due to land disputes has directly impacted agricultural production, as displaced households cannot plant or harvest crops, reducing food availability. Furthermore, competition over resources such as water and grazing land exacerbates tensions, further disrupting livelihoods dependent on agriculture and livestock.

Impact on Food Security

Most respondents (76.2%) reported that conflicts in Narok County have severely undermined food availability and access. Displacement due to land conflicts has been a central factor, as it displaces families from their homes and disrupts farming activities and agricultural cycles. Additionally, key informant interviews highlighted that conflicts have restricted access to local markets, limiting the ability to sell agricultural products and purchase essential food supplies. These disruptions have compounded food insecurity, leaving many households vulnerable to hunger and malnutrition.

Effectiveness of Mitigation Efforts

Although some mitigation efforts, such as the Maasai Livelihood Support Program and the Water Harvesting and Irrigation Scheme, have had localised success, the overall effectiveness of conflict mitigation strategies in Narok County remains questionable. Nearly half of the respondents (48.5%) rated these mitigation efforts as ineffective or very ineffective. The primary barriers to the success of these programs include inconsistent budget allocations, which hinder long-term planning, and the lack of meaningful community involvement in the decision-making process. Without addressing these challenges, the sustainability and effectiveness of conflict mitigation efforts will remain limited, leaving many communities vulnerable to ongoing food insecurity.

Impact of Cross-Border Conflicts on Food Security

The findings from this study provide a detailed understanding of how cross-border conflicts in Narok County have significantly disrupted food security. The impact is most evident in the reduced food availability, diminished market access, and deterioration in household food security. Conflicts have interfered with agricultural production, displaced communities, and restricted access to critical resources such as land and water for farming activities. These disruptions echo broader findings from similar conflict-affected regions globally. For example, studies by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO, 2018) have shown that ongoing conflicts in South Sudan caused severe disruptions in agricultural cycles, mirroring the situation in Narok County, where conflicts have displaced farmers, causing a loss of crops and reducing food availability.

In Narok, the disruption is also reflected in how these conflicts have created barriers to accessing food markets. The study found that frequent conflicts have blocked transportation routes, limited goods movement, and contributed to food shortages. This finding aligns with research from the World Food Programme (WFP, 2017), highlighting that conflict-related disruptions in Central Africa have had similar impacts, leading to a sharp decline in food availability and market access. Thus, the findings in Narok County are not isolated but fit within a broader pattern observed in conflict-prone regions, where insecurity undermines both local food production and market systems.

Additionally, the study revealed concerns over the quality and safety of available food. A significant proportion of respondents expressed that the ongoing conflicts had lowered the nutritional value and safety of the food they could access, a problem exacerbated by the reduced availability of fresh produce and reliance on lower-quality or processed foods. This is consistent with findings from Sartori and Fattibene (2019), who documented similar issues in conflict-affected regions where food safety regulations were weakened due to disrupted governance structures, leading to compromised food quality.

Effectiveness of Intervention Measures

The analysis of intervention measures to mitigate the impacts of cross-border conflicts on food security reveals a mixed picture. While some positive outcomes were reported, such as reduced conflict incidents and improved security in certain areas, many respondents perceived these interventions as inadequate or poorly implemented. This discrepancy in the perceived effectiveness of interventions suggests that while progress has been made, the strategies deployed have not fully addressed the root causes of food insecurity in conflict-affected areas.

The effectiveness of these interventions appears to be heavily dependent on community involvement and the adaptability of the strategies to the local context. Similar observations have been made by Devereux and Maxwell (2001), who emphasised that the success of food security interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa hinges on how well these measures are tailored to meet local needs. In Narok County, the lack of sufficient community participation in the design and implementation of these programs was cited as a key challenge, limiting the overall effectiveness of the interventions. This finding echoes the work of Tesfaye et al. (2017), who found that interventions in Ethiopia were more successful when they incorporated local knowledge and actively engaged communities.

Budgetary constraints and inconsistent resource allocation exacerbated the challenges in implementing effective interventions. Respondents reported fluctuating funding levels for food security programs, which undermined the sustainability of these initiatives. This issue is not unique to Narok County; it reflects a broader problem identified by Barrett and Carter (2013), who argued that inconsistent funding is one of the main reasons food security programs fail to achieve long-term success in conflict-prone regions.

Community Involvement in Mitigation Efforts

A critical gap identified in this study is the lack of adequate community involvement in mitigation efforts to address conflict and food insecurity. The exclusion of local voices from decision-making processes has limited the ownership and effectiveness of these interventions. This lack of involvement has practical consequences, as measures designed without input from the community are often met with resistance, reducing their potential impact.

The importance of community participation in conflict resolution and food security interventions has been well-documented. For instance, Kalyvas (2006) demonstrated that community involvement in Sierra Leone's post-conflict recovery led to more sustainable outcomes. In Narok County, the absence of such involvement has resulted in interventions that do not fully align with the needs or cultural practices of the affected populations. This finding is consistent with Lamba (2009), who highlighted that food security interventions in Kenya's arid and semi-arid lands were

more successful when communities were actively engaged in their design and execution. Furthermore, respondents expressed frustration over the top-down approach to program implementation, where authorities make decisions without sufficient consultation with residents. This disconnect between policymakers and communities undermines the sustainability of interventions, as residents are less likely to embrace programs that do not reflect their realities.

Changes in Sense of Security

The study found that the sense of security among residents in Narok County has improved following the implementation of conflict mitigation measures. This improvement is primarily attributed to reduced conflict incidents and the increased presence of community-driven security initiatives, such as local peace committees. These findings align with the work of Collier and Hoeffler (2004), who demonstrated that community-based security strategies in Uganda were instrumental in reducing conflict and restoring a sense of normalcy in affected areas.

However, security improvements have not been uniform across all regions within Narok County. While some areas have experienced significant reductions in conflict, others continue to face occasional violence, undermining the overall sense of safety. This uneven distribution of security improvements suggests that a more localised approach is needed to address different communities' specific challenges. Njeri (2020) supports this observation, noting that security interventions in Kenya's border regions must be tailored to the unique dynamics of each area to be effective.

Trust in Authorities

One of the more encouraging findings of this study is the gradual improvement in trust in authorities among residents of Narok County. This increase in trust is due primarily to visible efforts by the government and local authorities to address food security and conflict resolution. As Fukuyama (2000) noted in his study on post-conflict recovery in Rwanda, rebuilding trust in authorities is essential for the success of development programs, as it fosters cooperation and social cohesion.

Despite this positive trajectory, trust in authorities remains fragile in some areas, particularly where local leaders perceive a lack of transparency and communication. Respondents in these regions expressed concerns over inconsistent communication and the failure of authorities to involve communities in decision-making processes. Kelsall (2013) found similar dynamics in East Africa, where a lack of openness and engagement with local populations undermined trust in government officials. To build on the progress made, authorities in Narok County must ensure that communication is transparent and that community members are actively involved in designing and implementing future interventions.

In conclusion, the findings from this study highlight the complex and multifaceted relationship between cross-border conflicts and food security in Narok County. While progress has been made in certain areas, particularly in reducing conflict incidents and improving security, significant challenges remain in ensuring sustainable food security. These challenges include greater community involvement, more consistent funding, and localised interventions that address the specific needs of the affected populations. The study underscores the importance of addressing the root causes of conflict, particularly land disputes and resource competition, to ensure long-term food security in Narok County.

Discussion

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research on the relationship between conflict and food security, particularly the works of Opiyo et al. (2020) and the FAO (2018). These studies, much like the current one, highlight conflicts' significant negative impact on food availability, access, and quality in regions affected by disputes. In Narok County, cross-border conflicts, particularly those revolving around land and resource competition, have severely disrupted agricultural activities, reducing food production and limiting access to essential markets. These conflicts diminish the quantity of available food and compromise the quality of what is accessible as local farmers struggle to produce and distribute crops under increasingly hostile conditions.

The study also sheds light on the limited success of conflict mitigation efforts, a finding echoed in the broader literature. While initiatives such as the Maasai Livelihood Support Program and the Water Harvesting and Irrigation Scheme were intended to alleviate food insecurity, several factors have hindered their effectiveness. The lack of consistent budgetary support for these programs has created gaps in implementation, preventing the long-term success of otherwise promising strategies. Additionally, insufficient community involvement in the design and execution of these programs has significantly reduced their impact. Without the active participation of local communities—the most affected by the conflicts—these interventions are often seen as externally imposed solutions that fail to address the specific needs and realities.

The data gathered in this study suggest that achieving sustainable food security in conflict-affected areas like Narok County requires a more holistic and community-driven approach. First and foremost, addressing the root causes of conflicts, particularly land disputes and competition over natural resources, is critical. To prevent future disputes and stabilise agricultural activities, efforts must be made to establish clear land ownership and resource-sharing frameworks. Additionally, improving local participation in intervention programs is essential for their success. Communities must actively participate in these programs' planning and implementation phases to ensure the solutions are relevant, culturally sensitive, and sustainable. Without addressing these core issues, it is unlikely that food security will be restored or maintained in areas affected by ongoing conflict.

Conclusion

Cross-border conflicts in Narok County have profoundly impacted food security, significantly disrupting both the availability and quality of food. The ongoing land disputes and competition over natural resources have directly contributed to reduced agricultural output and limited market access, exacerbating food insecurity for many households. While some mitigation measures, such as the Maasai Livelihood Support Program, have achieved localised success, they have not been uniformly effective across the region. The challenges of inconsistent budget allocations and limited community participation have undermined the long-term sustainability of these efforts.

This study concludes that a more comprehensive and sustainable approach is necessary to effectively address food insecurity in conflict-affected areas. Efforts to resolve the root causes of conflict, particularly land and resource disputes, must be prioritised. Additionally, greater emphasis should be placed on community-based approaches, ensuring that local populations are actively involved in designing and implementing mitigation strategies. By fostering local ownership of these initiatives and ensuring that solutions are tailored to the community's specific needs, it will be possible to achieve lasting improvements in food security and resilience in Narok County.

Recommendations

To tackle the root causes of cross-border conflicts in Narok County, it is crucial to strengthen land management systems and implement sustainable conflict resolution mechanisms. Land disputes, driven by unclear land tenure and resource competition, are central to many conflicts. Strengthening land ownership laws and ensuring proper land title documentation will reduce the frequency and intensity of these disputes. Resource-sharing agreements for water and grazing land, mediated by neutral parties, can prevent competition over vital resources. Establishing and supporting local peace committees to mediate conflicts will provide long-term solutions, reducing disruptions to agricultural activities and enhancing food security.

Improving food security in conflict-prone areas requires a focus on security and infrastructure. Enhancing the presence of security forces in high-risk areas will help prevent conflicts that disrupt market access and food production. Investment in secure trade corridors and infrastructure such as roads and bridges will ensure that farmers and traders can move goods safely, stabilising food supplies. Regional trade agreements and better cold storage facilities can also help reduce food shortages and preserve perishable goods, ensuring a more stable food supply during crises.

A community-based approach is essential for the long-term success of food security interventions. Engaging local leaders and residents in the design and implementation of programs fosters ownership and ensures relevance to community needs. Clear communication strategies will keep

communities informed and involved, enhancing transparency and participation. Government agencies and NGOs should provide training and capacity-building initiatives, empowering communities to participate actively in conflict resolution and food security management. This will create more sustainable, impactful programs.

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