



## Challenges and opportunities for management of aggressive intractable inter-ethnic conflicts between the Turkana and Pokot people in the north-western region of Kenya

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### ABSTRACT

The North-Western of Kenya has endured persistent, belligerent inter-ethnic conflicts. These battles are particularly between the Turkana and Pokot communities. The conflicts are rooted in historical marginalization and competition for scarce natural resources. Additionally, cultural validation of warriorhood and widespread availability of small arms have contributed enormously to the exacerbation of the skirmishes. Earlier interventions have been unsuccessful resulting from weak state presence, politicization and insufficient community ownership. This study identified and analyzed the main challenges hindering effective conflict this two communities. It also explored feasible and locally driven opportunities for sustainable peacebuilding. The study is guided by the Conflict Transformation Theory of John Paul Lederach. This theory emphasizes the need to alter structural injustices, associations, narratives and institutions for durable peace. A mixed-methods design was adopted. It integrated descriptive survey and phenomenological approaches. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis. A stratified sample of 400 respondents (Turkana: 60%; West Pokot: 40%) participated. Instrument reliability exceeded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.76. Quantitative data that was categorical was analyzed by Chi-square test. Qualitative data was thematically analyzed and implied collective meaning reported. Findings revealed that the conflict is sustained by the proliferation of firearms, inadequate security services, political manipulation and cultural endorsement of violence (notably in Turkana). Over 53% of respondents reported increased conflict since 2017. Turkana respondents experienced more frequent attacks and upheld the "heroic warrior" ideal more than their West Pokot counterparts. Structural variables such as poverty, unemployment among the youth, and marginalization were just as crucial in driving conflict continuity. While institutions of customary conflict resolution are in retreat, communities were keen to be engaged in peace processes. Cultural dispositions and exposure to conflict variability point towards region-based intervention. The community trusts its capacity to solve problems, offering a window of opportunity for bottom-up peacebuilding. Turkana-Pokot conflict is deeply rooted, multi-layered and mounting. Strength and resilience of the people are a fertile ground for radical peacebuilding grounded in local contexts and participatory governance. There ought to be a multi-sectoral intervention: institution strengthening of people-owned peace structures, equitable disarmament, participatory governance, focused peace education on particular alternative masculinities and investment in public infrastructure. State action has to be centered on trust-building, early warning and psychosocial healing to enable sustainable change of conflict.

**Keywords:** Conflict Transformation, Inter-Ethnic Conflict, Pastoralist Communities, Peacebuilding, Turkana-Pokot

### I. INTRODUCTION

North-Western Kenya has, for several decades, been a focal point of long-standing and often violent inter-ethnic conflicts, particularly between the Turkana and Pokot. The root causes of the conflicts are an embedded historical process of marginalization, competition for scarce resources, and cultural practice that enshrine raiding and warrior cultures (Chebunet *et al.*, 2013). Livestock, the cornerstone of economic subsistence and social status among pastoralist groups, is both a source of sustenance and a source of conflict. Stealing cattle, or livestock rustling, has evolved from a cultural practice to a highly militarized, commercialized and politicized organized violence (Shanguhya, 2021). At the center of this conflict lies the contestation of access to natural resources, such as pasture and water, that has been compounded by sporadic drought, climate change and population pressure. These environmental stresses cross-cut deep-

seated grievances over contested administrative borders, historic injustices and poor institutional reach in the region. The restricted access to state security and development services left a void to be occupied, in most cases, by de facto power structures, local militias, and cultural patterns that produce cycles of revenge and distrust (Harper, 2021).

In addition, the proliferation of light weapons and small arms has increased the intensity and scale of clashes. Without strong disarmament efforts, coupled with porous borders and weak enforcement, weapons continue to flow freely, promoting raids and undermining peace initiatives. This insecurity has ripple effects with far-reaching consequences not just endangering lives and property but also disrupting social services, hindering education, limiting economic opportunity, and undermining community cohesion (United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, 2019). Efforts to bring an end to these conflicts have had mixed success. Traditional institutions such as inter-ethnic peace accords and elders' councils matter but are increasingly challenged by modern political processes, youth disillusionment, and transformed cultural identities. Government interventions including security measures and peacebuilding initiatives have often proven to be unsustainable, uncoordinated, or not actually owned by communities. Politicization of conflict and choice-making about resource allocation also continue to erode popular trust in the public sector.

Despite all these grave challenges, there is growing awareness of the need for holistic, multi-level, and community-based peacebuilding strategies. The hope lies in utilizing education, economic empowerment, youth engagement, and inclusive governance as the pillars of sustainable stability (Opiyo *et al.*, 2024). Capacity development initiatives which encourage local capacity, improve livelihoods, and foster inter-community cooperation such as cross-border trading projects, common infrastructure, peace talks, and mutual management of resources are successful mechanisms to handle underlying causes and encourage reconciliation (Medina *et al.*, 2023). The successful resolution of these violent and intractable inter-ethnic conflicts demands not only political will and strategic investment but a cultural shift that remakes security, identity, and coexistence in the pastoralist frontier. As Kenya persists to pursue inclusive development and national unity, understanding and resolving the complexities of the Turkana–Pokot conflict is a critical move toward peace and prosperity in the region.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Previous studies of northern Kenya's inter-ethnic conflict have tended to focus on the economic and environmental causes of conflict, particularly shortages of resources, such as competition for water and pastureland (Greiner, 2013; Mkutu, 2007). Some research has also examined the spread of small arms and youth militarization, noting how porous borders and poor state regulation promote continued insecurity (Bevan, 2007; Nesterova *et al.*, 2022). In addition, studies such as that of Eaton (2008) have also analyzed the cultural roots of cattle raiding and warrior identity. They reveal the implications of these customary practices that have evolved into more commercialized and sophisticated forms of violence (Eaton, 2008).

While these studies have served to set the overall outlines of conflict in the region, there are some central gaps that require attention. These previous findings have drawn to a significant extent on secondary data or overall estimates. Therefore, there is need for grassroots, participatory outlooks that could deliver locally grounded answers. Additionally, it is important to analyze the evolving nature of cultural dynamics. For instance, the manner in which established beliefs and traditions are being rearticulated by forces of political manipulation, education and climatic change. Furthermore, few studies have focused on psychological impacts, sociological manifestations and cultural identities. That is with emphasis on how revenge cycles, trauma and perceptions of heroism and victimhood operate among the Pokots and Turkanas. The voices of local actors, such as elders, reformed ex-fighters, women leaders and youth are often silenced or sketchily checked. It is important to have an evidence-based, multidisciplinary research that not only reveals systemic causes of conflict but also maps locally driven, culturally grounded strategies of transformation and resilience.

### 1.2 Research Objectives

- i. To identify and analyze the key challenges hindering the effective management of aggressive and intractable inter-ethnic conflicts between the Turkana and Pokot communities.
- ii. To explore viable opportunities and locally driven strategies that can be leveraged to enhance sustainable peace and conflict management efforts in the North-Western region of Kenya.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Review

Conflict Transformation Theory, as developed by John Paul Lederach, presents an intriguing paradigm in which to examine and address the violent, deep-seated inter-ethnic conflicts between the Pokot and Turkana communities in the North-Western region of Kenya (Fjelde & Østby, 2014). This theory goes beyond conventional approaches to conflict resolution as short-term settlement or suppression of violence, and instead pursues a deep and sustainable transformation of the relationships, structures, behavior and narratives underlying conflict (Saaïda, 2023). It treats

conflict not as a crisis to be managed, but rather as a potential catalyst for positive social change if approached holistically and inclusively.

In the conflict between Turkana and Pokot, the relevance of Conflict Transformation Theory is apparent in several ways. The violence is deep-rooted, historical, and recurrent and is strongly rooted in historical grievances, border tensions, socio-economic exclusion, and identity-based suspicion (Aguilar, 2019). Violence in this case is not random or discrete but is guided by generations of cultural, political, and structural forces that have created a normalized cycle of violence and retaliation. Therefore, meaningful intervention cannot be limited to temporary peace talks or disarmament drives, but must rather attempt to transform the grounds upon which the conflict is based. One of the primary focuses of this theory is confronting structural injustices. The Turkana and Pokot regions have historically been marginalized by the central state, with very little access to fundamental services such as education, health, security, and infrastructure (Devine, 2016). The structural marginalization has created the environment in which violence arises as a survival strategy. Conflict Transformation Theory calls for the reformulation of such asymmetries by governance and development that is inclusive, and in so doing, ensuring that both communities have equitable access to public resources and representation (Rodríguez & Inturias, 2018). Addressing such structural deficits is central to building trust and legitimacy in state institutions that have long been perceived as distant or biased.

Also, critical is the transformation of relations between the two societies. The Pokot and Turkana communities have undergone decades of violence against each other. This has resulted in deeply engrained conflicts and distrust between them (Marty, 2024). Conflict Transformation focuses on the healing of these broken relations. The theory proposes finding solutions through community dialogues, shared cultural rituals, truth-telling forums, and reconciliation processes. Reconstruction of inter-communal trust requires room for both acknowledgment of past injustice and the bilateral generation of future obligations to peace. This theory also demands a shift in narratives and perceptions that fuel conflict. Negative stereotypes and inherited tales of enmity within both communities are utilized to justify ongoing aggression (Kriesberg, 2010). Transformative peacebuilding has to engage in deconstructing these narratives through peace education, media work, and inter-community youth and cultural exchange programs that promote empathy, shared identity, and a sense of interdependence. Without a change in the way each group thinks about the other, peace initiatives are shallow and tenuous.

Additionally, Conflict Transformation Theory is in favour of local ownership of the peace process. State interventions in the formal sense are necessary but are often insufficient or unsustainable if not complemented with local actors (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). For Turkana–Pokot, traditional leaders, elders, women's groups, and youth formations are all players with important roles in shaping social norms and ending conflict. Their representation in official peace and development structures ensures that responses are context-specific, culturally appropriate, and based on lived experience. Empowering these constituencies to lead processes of dialogue, disarmament, restitution, and education strengthens the legitimacy and sustainability of peace processes. The theory focuses on building "peace infrastructure" systems, institutions, and relationships that actively sustain peace rather than merely responding to outbreaks of violence (Muluken, 2020). In the North-Western region, for instance, these may include common grazing corridors, cross-border peace markets, inter-county peace committees, and common educational or health facilities. Not only do such concrete investments respond to dire human needs, but they also foster continued interaction and cooperation among communities that have for long regarded one another as enemies.

### 2.1.1 Conflict Transformation Theory

Offers a solid and pragmatic theory for comprehending and addressing the complexities of the Turkana–Pokot conflict. By its focus on the long-term transformation of relations, structures, perceptions, and systems, this theory aligns with the call to build sustainable, inclusive, and locally led solutions (Chebunet *et al.*, 2013). It emphasizes that sustainable peace must be fostered from the inside of people and cannot be forced on them externally or through violence; it must be grown in them through a careful and incremental process of healing, empowerment, and justice.

## 2.2 Empirical Review

More empirical evidence has analyzed the dynamics of inter-ethnic conflict of Kenya's pastoralist communities, namely the Turkana and Pokot. The research across the board posits that the conflict is anchored in a matrix of intertwined environmental, political, cultural, and economic factors, and that it is maintained by local and structural dynamics (García-López, 2019). Several field studies have confirmed that it is the lack of resources in particular access to water and pasture land that is the main reason for violent inter-group encounters among pastoralist groups. Greiner (2013), in his research on conflict in Kenya's drylands, confirmed that mobility routines and competition for nature resources significantly enhanced the likelihood of inter-group conflicts, especially under conditions of drought (Greiner, 2013). Similarly, Opiyo (2024) conducted a study in Turkana and West Pokot counties and established the fact that climate unpredictability, coupled with weak conflict resolution mechanisms, tends to push societies into conflict over shrinking grazing land (Opiyo *et al.*, 2024).

The availability of firearms has also been empirically linked with heightened violence in the region. Wild (2018), in a comprehensive analysis of small arms and pastoralist conflict in the Horn of Africa, documented how the militarization of cattle thieving, fueled by porous borders and weak enforcement, transformed raiding from a cultural activity into a commercialized and highly violent enterprise (Wild *et al.*, 2018). He further noted that state disarmament initiatives' lack of effectiveness in serving communities fairly often led to creating suspicion and resisting, and thereby the local militia's sustainability. Field studies also confirmed the state security institutions' and government apparatuses' lack of effectiveness in containing the war. Okumu (2013), in discussing pastoralist security in Kenya, observed that government intervention in areas of conflict is typically reactionary, unthought-out, and underfunded (Okumu, 2013). The feeling of state neglect or predisposition has led many communities to resort to alternative systems of justice and security, including youth warrior groups and traditional councils, which, although locally legitimate, have the capacity or objectivity required to bring about an end to large-scale violence.

Empirical data also suggests the collapse of conventional peace models, especially among young people. Schilling (2012) conducted interviews and focus group interviews in Turkana and found that the majority of young men no longer respect the power of elders in conflict and peace processes (Schilling *et al.*, 2012). Contemporary raiding decisions are rather being influenced more by peer pressure, desperation for money, or political manipulation. This generation divide is a big challenge to traditional conflict resolution and requires creative approaches engaging the youth more overtly. On the contrary, certain empirical studies have noted prospects of peacebuilding in the region. Issifu (2016) documented how grassroots peace committees promote dialogue and early warning. Their studies in conflict-ridden ASAL counties indicated that if such peace institutions were inclusive, well-organized, and had the backing of the local administration, they were capable of reducing tensions and arranging ceasefire (Issifu, 2016).

Moreover, empirical evaluation conducted by organizations such as Practical Action and Mercy Corps has found that inter-communal development initiatives, such as common livestock markets, water points, and inter-county peace corridors, can foster economic interdependence and reduce the incentives for violence. For example, Mercy Corps' USAID-funded PEACE III program in Northern Kenya showed that when communities are involved in shared economic activity and infrastructure development, they are likely to coexist peacefully with one another (Mercy Corps, 2024). It is also supported by research that education and youth empowerment are necessary for durable peace. For instance, the Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis report (Bosire & Nduvi, 2018) credited access to quality education with reduced participation in violence among the pastoralist youth. Peace education programs in ASAL schools were found to have significant effects on attitudes towards cooperation and tolerance. In addition, power devolution as per Kenya's 2010 Constitution has been empirically associated with enhanced opportunities for conflict resolution at the local level. A study by Akall (2021) indicated that Turkana and West Pokot county governments had begun to build peacebuilding programs based on context, though success was variable depending on political leadership, participation, and budget allocations (Akall, 2021).

### 2.3 Challenges in Managing Aggressive Intractable Inter-Ethnic Conflicts

The inter-ethnic violence between the Turkana and Pokot is characterized viciousness and resistance to peace. Among the greatest challenges is the spread of small arms and light weapons. This has raised the lethality and frequency of cattle raids. The weapons, which are most often acquired through porous borders and informal networks, have emboldened youth militias and weakened traditional systems of control (Regional Centre on Small Arms [RECSA], 2023). At the same time, cultural normalization of violence, and more particularly the glorification of warriorhood among young men, has solidified raiding as a socially accepted means of claiming masculinity and achieving livelihood. Environmental stressors such as recurring drought, overgrazing, and land degradation have intensified competition over key natural resources like grazing land and water points, increasing the possibility for violent conflict (Egal, 2022; Wanyonyi *et al.*, 2025). The shortage of arable land and the absence of formal agreements on sharing resources also heighten tensions.

Governance deficits compound the problem. The region is beset by poor state presence, such as weak law enforcement, absence of infrastructure, and minimal investment in public services. State interventions, such as disarmament initiatives and security operations, have too often been reactive, coercive, or seen to be biased and hence undermined trust in formal institutions (Terzungwe & Tavershima, 2024). In addition, the undermining of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms that had hitherto been effective in guaranteeing peace under customary laws and restitution systems has led to a lacuna in local governance. Political exploitation especially during election periods tends to capitalize on ethnic divisions, while boundary disputes and unresolved historical grievances continue to be sources of flashpoints for violence (Eneyew & Ayalew, 2023). These reinforcing and intersecting factors account for the intractability and belligerence of the conflict.



## 2.4 Opportunities for Conflict Management and Peacebuilding

Despite the complexity of the Turkana–Pokot conflict, there exist several opportunities for inclusive, sustainable, and community-led transformative conflict management. Local peace initiatives such as inter-community peace committees and forums of cultural exchanges have proved to reduce tensions and create trust (Hendrickson *et al.*, 1996). Whenever such frameworks are broad-based with an overlap of youths, elders, women, and local leaders, they have the tendency to consolidate long-term reconciliation and ownership of the peace process. Education and youth engagement present a long-term solution by addressing the root causes of the conflict such as joblessness, marginalization, and identity-based violence (Lwamba *et al.*, 2022). Peace education, vocational skills training, and livelihood programs can offer pastoralist youth alternatives to raiding and make them agents of change within their communities.

Devolution, within Kenya's 2010 Constitution, provides a fertile ground for conflict-sensitive development and localized peacebuilding (Odidi, 2022). County governments are well-positioned to initiate and fund programs that respond to local conditions, mediate resource-sharing agreements, and facilitate cross-county peace processes. With open and inclusive handling, devolved institutions can bridge the gap between state power and peoples' needs (Kimani *et al.*, 2021; Richard, 2025). Cross-border cooperation and integrated resource management present possibilities to decrease resource-based conflict. Joint grazing schemes, co-managed water points, and peace markets encourage cooperation instead of competition. Such efforts, particularly when supported by regional institutions and development partners, can institutionalize peace and decrease the economic incentives for violence.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design

The research employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating descriptive survey and phenomenological methods to obtain in-depth insight into livestock theft among the Turkana and Pokot communities. Descriptive survey research provided quantitative data on the prevalence, causes, and socio-economic effects of livestock theft, while the phenomenological approach provided qualitative proof of community experiences, perceptions, and conflict-resolution mechanisms.

### 3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Turkana and West Pokot counties in Northwest Kenya. The two districts are predominantly inhabited by pastoral communities whose livelihood is based on cattle keeping. The area has experienced recurring conflicts caused by cattle theft, grazing land disputes, and weak enforcement of the law. The study targeted sub-counties with high rates of cattle rustling to gather information on the topic.

### 3.3 Target Population

The study targeted pastoralist households, community leaders, security personnel, and government representatives in Turkana and West Pokot counties.

### 3.4 Sampling Technique and Sample Size

The determination of house hold sample size was done using a mathematical formula developed by Yamane (Pourhoseingholi *et al.*, 2013).

$$n = N / (1 + Ne^2)$$

Where

$n$  = corrected sample size,  $N$  = population size, and  $e$  = Margin of error (MoE),  $e = 0.05$ .

$$n = 1548217 / (1 + 1548217 (0.05)^2)$$

$$n = 1548217 / 3871.5$$

$$n = 399.9 \sim 400$$

The sample for each of the two ethnic groups was allotted proportionately based on their population as shown below.

$$\text{West Pokot } 621,241 / 1,548,217 = 0.4 \times 400 = 160 \text{ (40\%)}$$

$$\text{Turkana} = 926,976 / 1,548,217 = 0.6 \times 400 = 240 \text{ (60\%)}$$

### 3.5 Data Collection Instruments

Data collection was both interactive (key informant interview and focus group discussion) and non-interactive (document analysis and use of questionnaires) whose primary mode of the data collection was knowledge, attitude and practice (KAP) survey. KAP granted the researcher the capacity to analyze patterns of respondent behavior in the militant culture promotion environment. The triangulation enabled the researcher to have a varied of in formations of aggressive culture propagation leading to conflicts in the area of study. Face to face interview and focused group

discussion were used to collect qualitative data. Participants and settings were defined by location and people who would be able to best assist with the understanding of the central phenomenon of perpetuation of cultural practices and how it is related to the conflicts under study. In the field, the field researcher made reflective and descriptive notes from the FGDs and interviews conducted during the empirical study.

### 3.6 Pilot Study

The pilot study was conducted in Endebess sub-county beyond the Turkana-Pokot border region to pilot test the research instruments. The sample of 40 respondents (10% of the total sample) was utilized to try out the questionnaire and interview guides' clarity, appropriateness, and feasibility. Refining was conducted to improve question construction and minimize ambiguity.

### 3.7 Validity of the Instruments

The face validity of the questionnaire was established by examining the degree of ease with which the respondents could respond to the questions they were asked. In this regard, the researcher observed the respondents during the pilot study and also asked whether they found it difficult to respond to any question. Any confusing questions were corrected at once. To determine the content validity, the questionnaire was presented to supervisors in the university and other university research experts. Expert opinion was sought from them, and their feedback provided upon return were utilized in redefining the questionnaire. For determining construct validity, questions were also checked against what would be required for the outcome and how effective questions would be used for the research. The questions were also constructed from the research questions and the gaps in literature.

### 3.8 Reliability of the Instruments

Reliability was determined using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of internal consistency. A satisfactory reliability level of 0.7 and above was used. Test-retest reliability was also carried out by sending the questionnaire to a limited number of respondents twice within two weeks to test response consistency.

**Table 1**

*Reliability Testing*

Instrument	Number of Items	Pilot Sample (n=40)	Cronbach's Alpha
Structured Questionnaire	25	40	0.82
Interview guide (KIIs)	12	10	0.79
FGD Guide	10	6	0.76
Observation Checklist	8	10	0.81

### 3.9 Data Analysis Techniques

Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis approaches were employed in this study. Quantitative data, which were gathered using structured questionnaires, were subjected to descriptive statistics to summarize responses as frequencies and percentages. The Chi-square test of independence was employed to examine associations between categorical variables such as gender, age, county of origin, level of education and conflict-related experiences. Conversely, qualitative data obtained from focus group discussions, key informant interviews and field observations were analyzed thematically. This involved transcribing the discussions and interviews, reading them thoroughly, and identifying recurring patterns and ideas. These were coded systematically and grouped into general themes of cultural causes of conflict, land and border disputes, emotional and psychological impacts, and community-based solutions to peace. Thematic analysis also provided a deeper insight into community members' perceptions and lived experiences, revealing how cultural beliefs and traditional practices inform conflict dynamics and conflict resolution efforts.

## IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Community Perceptions on Conflict Drivers and Cultural Endorsement of Violence

The findings of this study yield pertinent information regarding the intricate conflicts' sustenance dynamics of the North-Western region of Kenya. All the respondents universally cited border disputes, escalation of guns, illiteracy, poverty, rivalry for pasture, retaliatory violence, and general regional insecurity as key aspects of sustaining inter-ethnic fighting and cattle raids. These results are in line with previous studies, for example, Greiner (2013), who illustrates the role played by environmental stressors and livelihood pressures on escalating territorial conflicts among pastoralist communities (Greiner, 2013). Access to and utilization of firearms, particularly G3 and AK25 rifles, was also another significant issue cited by respondents. The majority of serial attack victims would be able to identify these specific weapons, vindicating Mkutu's (2007) assertion that the introduction of small arms in pastoralist areas has militarized

raiding, increased casualty counts, and consolidated retaliatory cycles of violence (Mkutu, 2007). The inability of some respondents to name the actual models also shows uneven exposure or awareness, maybe indicating variation in levels of direct observation or engagement between individuals or areas.

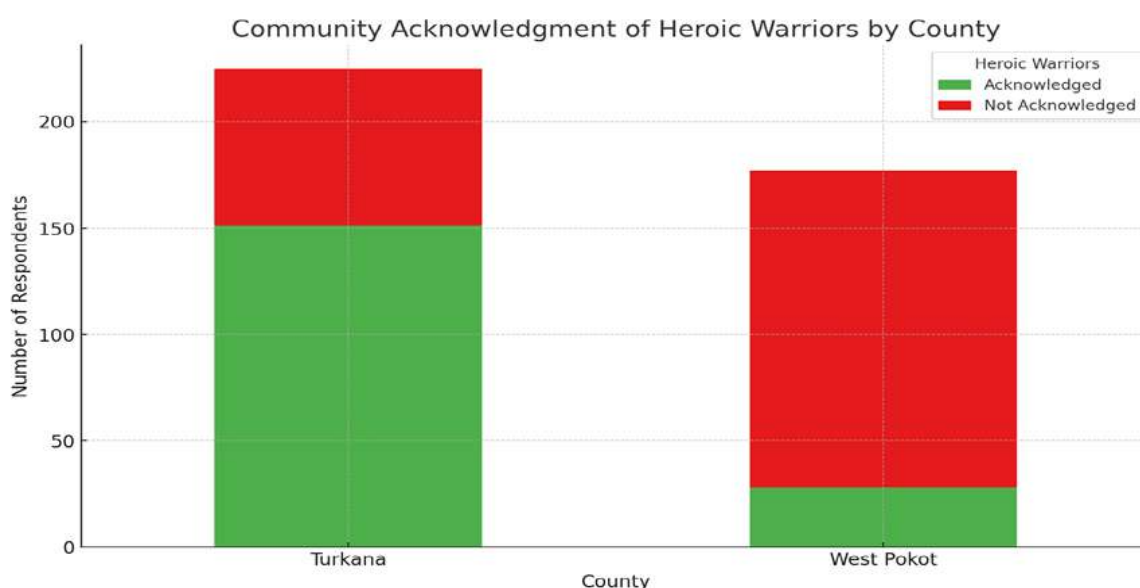
In a focused group discussion with elders from Kainuk in Turkana South, border with West-Pokot. They affirmed that; *“Our way of life has been shaped by the need to defend our animals. The raids are not only about cows, cows symbolize pride, honour and our identity. We teach young men are that in order to be a man, one has to defend the community at all costs.”*

One of the distinct cultural aspects of the study was the recognition of "heroic warriors" in the community. While over half of all respondents (54.6%) indicated that their communities did not support or recognize heroic warriors, there were regional variations. Specifically, 67.1% of respondents in Turkana County indicated that heroic warriors were recognized by the community and 15.8% of those in West Pokot reported the same. This statistically significant difference ( $P < 0.0001$ ) is depicted in Figure 1, which demonstrates clearly the varying cultural attitudes towards valorization of warrior value between the two counties. These findings agree with Schilling *et al.* (2012), who documented the continued prevalence of warrior identity as a marker of masculinity and community pride among Turkana (Schilling *et al.*, 2012). On the other hand, other studies such as those of Morogo (2022) show there is a new trend in some West Pokot societies away from valorizing warriorhood, especially where peace education and civil society activism have taken root (Morogo, 2022).

A key informant an Elder from Sigor in West-Pokot stated that;

*“We sing war songs when soldiers return with livestock. It is our tradition, but today it causes more harm than good. The young ones are losing the meaning of the traditions they employ them to defend killing.”*

Combining the quantitative and cultural dimensions, this study stresses the complex interdependence of structural drivers and socio-cultural norms to sustain conflict. Turkana cultural valorization of warriors can legitimize violent behavior and normalize violence, while West Pokot less intense acknowledgment may be an indication of shifting attitudes and openness towards peacebuilding. As shown in Figure 1, these cultural variations require locally specific solutions. In Turkana, peacebuilding might be assisted by challenging the social constructs of heroism and masculinity and promoting alternative sources of recognition such as education, community service, or entrepreneurship. In West Pokot, the initiatives might focus on reinforcing the emerging trend towards peaceful coexistence and promoting local institutions that discourage retaliatory violence. The study both supports and augments existing literature in offering a localized, qualitative account of how conflict is experienced, legitimized, and perhaps perpetuated through cultural values. In the future, any successful intervention must not only address material causes such as resource competition and insecurity but must also explore to a large extent the symbolic and identity-based dimensions of inter-ethnic conflict.



**Figure 1**  
*Community Acknowledgement of Heroic Warriors*

#### 4.2 Frequency and Intensity of Violent Attacks across Study Areas

The study assessed how often the ethnic communities within the North-Western part of Kenya experience violent attacks. This is as a result of the prevailing inter-ethnic tensions. The findings revealed a high rate of assaults among the respondents interviewed. The most of the respondents that is 138 individuals (34.6%), reported to have

experienced attacks twice a week. A total of 99 individuals (24.6%) stated that such attacks occurred once a month. Furthermore, 74 (18.5%) experienced attacks every three months, whereas 34 of the study participants (8.5%) indicated that the attacks occurred twice a year. Notably, 55 individuals (13.8%) were indefinite concerning the frequency of attacks.

Comparative analysis between counties revealed differences in self-reported frequency of violent encounters. In West Pokot County, 56 respondents (31.6%) reported that attacks occurred every three months. Also, 49 (28.1%) reported monthly occurrences, 34 (19.3%) reported biannual attacks and 18 respondents (10.5%) reported experiencing assaults twice weekly or were not sure. Contrastingly, Turkana County respondents reported much higher levels of frequent violence. A huge majority 120 participants (53.4%) stated that attacks occurred twice a week, while 65 respondents (28.8%) indicated a monthly frequency. Additionally, 25 individuals (11.0%) and 15 individuals (6.8%) reported experiencing attacks once every three months and twice a year, respectively. These findings show that Turkana experiences more attacks and of greater intensity compared to West Pokot, with possible implications for variation in exposure to violence, conflict intensity, and the quality of inter-communal relations in the two counties. This variation is graphically illustrated in Figure 2 below.

These findings are consistent with reports by Schilling et al. (2012), who indicated that Turkana has historically been more exposed to armed attacks and inter-ethnic violence, partly due to its geographical proximity to a number of hostile borders of Uganda, South Sudan, and Ethiopia. There is as well as intense competition over basic resources such as water and pasture (Schilling *et al.*, 2012). The frequency of attacks in Turkana recorded in the current study confirms this observation, suggesting a more profound and entrenched pattern of insecurity. In comparison, studies such as Atta-Asamoah (2015) and Kaijage & Nyagah (2009) have shown that while West Pokot also suffers from cattle rustling and ethnic clashes, in certain areas it has gained from peacebuilding efforts, cross-border collaboration, and localized disarmament programs (Atta-Asamoah, 2015; Kaijage & Nyagah, 2009). This may partially explain the lower rate of attacks recorded in West Pokot, as seen in the current data.

A focused group discussion in a forum between Chiefs from both Turkana and West-Pokot revealed a number of things. One expressed his sentiments as;

*“The border issue has never been resolved. Maps have changed, governments have changed, but we, the people, have remained in conflict. Sometimes you may think we are cursed or its by design. Each dry season, the same fights erupt over grazing land.”*

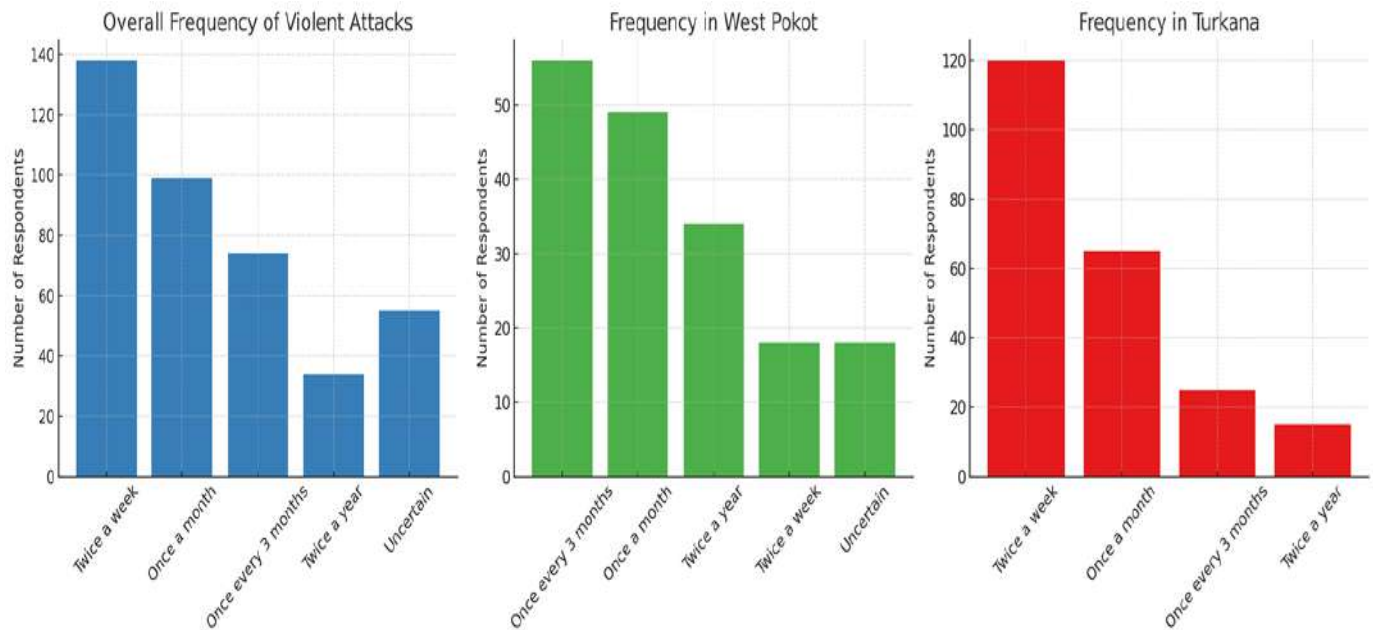
Further, the inequality in attack frequency may reflect regional difference in state presence and security infrastructure. Turkana, being larger in size and further away, continues to face logistical challenges in the deployment of efficient security services. This has created fertile ground for the normalization and high frequency of armed revenge, as reported by over half of the Turkana respondents. On the contrary, there are some regions in West Pokot that have enjoyed the dividends of administrative decentralization and community policing, which could be an explanation for the relatively lower incidence of violence. The findings also coincide with United Nations Development Programme (2022) who determined that pastoralist conflict is most acute where state services do not reach and where societies rely most on customary security arrangements, such as arming youth warriors (UNDP, 2022).

A reformed ex-warrior also stated that;

*“I ended up being involved in raids since our animals were stolen. It started as retaliation, then it became a vicious cycle. The land we are fighting for is not grass it's survival.”*

The Turkana's high attack rate may be indicative of such dynamics and necessitate specialized interventions that go beyond law enforcement to include dialogue, development, and disarmament. The present findings expand on existing research while providing novel, localized confirmation of West Pokot-Turkana differences in conflict exposure. Such variations underscore the need for region-specific strategies that address the unique social, cultural, and geographical determinants of the incidence and scale of violent conflict.





**Figure 2**  
Showing the Frequency of Violent Attacks Overall and Per County

#### 4.3 Perceptions on Conflict Trends and Underlying Drivers

The study sought to investigate the perceptions of trends in inter-ethnic violence and the reasons behind their persistence in the North-Western Kenya region. The majority of the respondents (215 participants, 53.8%) perceived an upward trend in the frequency and intensity of hostilities in recent years. On the other hand, 93 participants (23.1%) believed that the situation has remained the same, while 80 participants (20.0%) experienced a decrease in hostilities. A smaller group of 12 people (3.1%) were uncertain about the trend. Disaggregated by region, the data show strong contrasts. In West Pokot, 117 respondents (66.7%) reported an increase in conflict, whereas only 25 (14.0%) reported a decline, 22 (12.3%) reported stability, and 11 (7.0%) were uncertain. Conversely, in Turkana, 99 (43.8%) indicated an increase, 56 (24.7%) mentioned decline, and 70 (31.5%) indicated that conflict levels had not changed. These differences may reflect varying local environments, exposure to violence, and effectiveness of conflict reduction measures in the two counties.

In attributing causes of increasing conflict, most of the respondents (194 individuals, 48.5%) associated the increase with the availability of weapons, testifying to the central position arms proliferation takes in destabilizing the region. Mkutu (2007) corroborates this, demonstrating how access to small arms in pastoralist communities makes local conflicts militarized and deadly confrontations (Mkutu, 2007). In addition, 160 participants (40.0%) cited the inadequacy of government security efforts, echoing conclusions drawn by Morogo (2022), who argued that the state's weak presence in Kenya's ASAL regions taints preventive and responsive conflict management (Morogo, 2022). Other explanations less commonly cited included hunger (4.6%), grazing conflicts (3.8%), militaristic cultural orientations (0.8%), and ambiguity (2.3%), which suggests that while competition for resources and cultural values are factor contributors, they are not the greatest perceived drivers of escalation.

The local dichotomy among these views is further elaborated. In West Pokot, the largest category (114 respondents, 64.9%) linked more conflict with state failure to obtain them, while 25 (14.0%) blamed availability of firearms. Equivalent, albeit smaller, groups (9 respondents or 5.3% respectively) invoked hunger, conflict over grazing, and uncertainty. In Turkana County, the pattern was reversed 169 respondents (75.3%) attributed the blame to firearms as the primary reason, while 47 (20.5%) cited a shortage of security. Some respondents also blamed conflicts arising from grazing disputes (2.7%) and militarized culture (1.4%). These differences underscore the ways in which local circumstances and ordinary experiences shape perceptions of conflict. While both counties undergo insecurity, members of Turkana tend to connect conflict with the weaponization and, perhaps because they are most frequently exposed to armed violence, associate it most strongly. Members of West Pokot, as mentioned, accentuate state disregard, which would reflect frustration concerning unfair or unequal application and guard mechanisms in such a county.

A group of women from Lokichar in Turkana reported that;

*"When men go out for raids, we are left alone to take care of children. We become widows in numbers. We cannot reach hospitals or schools during conflicts. Fetching water itself is a risk-for-life experience."*

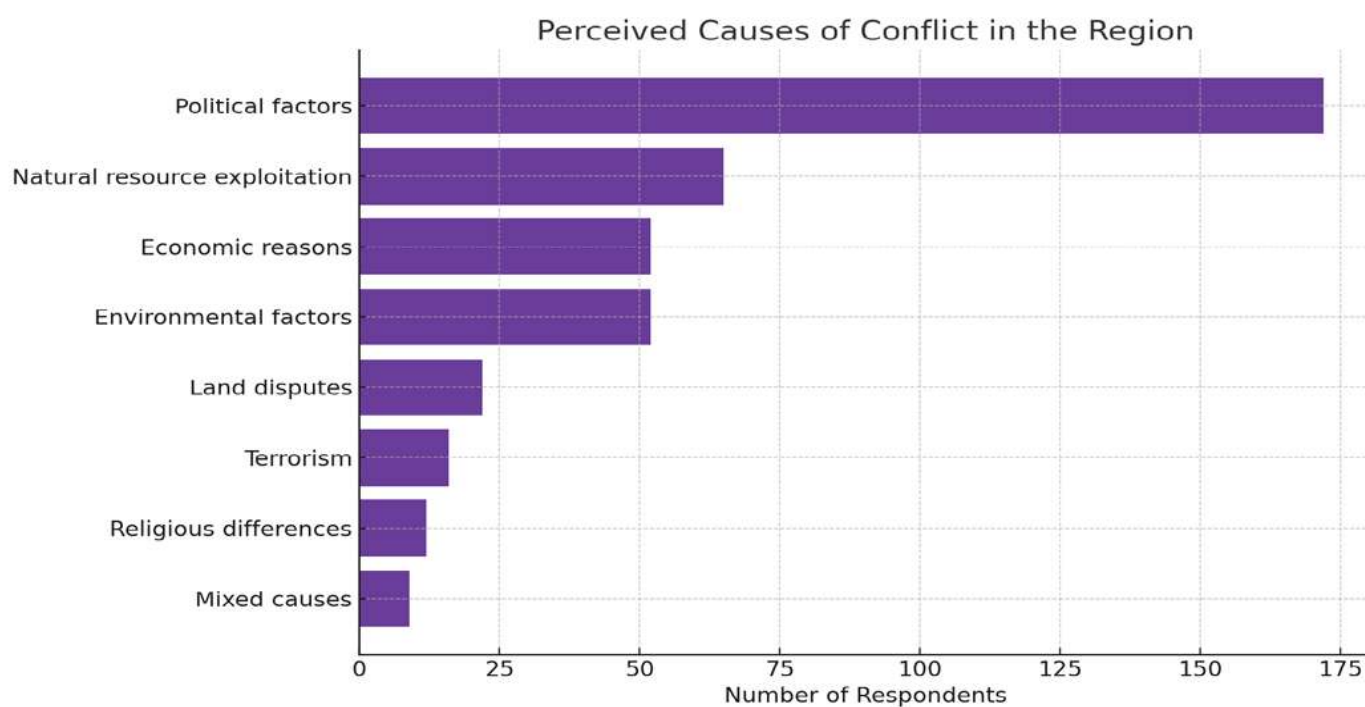
When probing deeper causes of conflict, 172 individuals (43.0%) attributed political reasons, including ethnic mobilization, power competition, and contested governance. This is consistent with Greiner (2013) and Behr (2022), who argue that political leaders tend to utilize ethnic fragmentation as a strategy for winning elections at the expense of igniting tensions in marginalized pastoralist areas (Behr, 2022; Greiner, 2013). Other causes mentioned were the exploitation of natural resources (16.2%), economic suffering (13.1%), and environmental pressure (13.1%) all indicative of the structural stressors that provide fertile grounds for the escalation of conflict. Few respondents suggested violence as the result of land conflicts (5.4%), terrorism (3.8%), religious variations (3.1%), or a combination of more than one factor (2.3%). These sentiments are depicted graphically in Figure 3, which aptly highlights the dominance of political and structural-economic explanations of the causes of conflict in the knowledge domain of communities.

A youth leader in West-Pokot said that;

*“The majority of the boys in my village dropped out of school. They want to be part of the action. They find guns and raids exciting. Education does not seem to matter to them anymore.”*

These findings align with earlier studies carried out by Kubin & von Sikorski (2021), which encapsulated the snowballing effect of poverty, scarcity of resources, weak state institutions, and political manipulation to drive conflict across pastoralist belts (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). The meeting of recent information and earlier evidence makes the plea for multi-sectoral interventions, both addressing proximal drivers like arms and insecurity as well as structural causes such as political exclusion, resource inequality and environmental stress, all the more compelling.

The results of the research present a real picture of complex security deficits dynamics, structural weakness, and political manipulation in fuelling conflict in Turkana and West Pokot. Although some of the reasons are similar across counties, differing perceptions at regional levels show that peacebuilding responses need to be tailored to contexts. Incorporation of community views, as is evident from this research, is essential to make interventions not only effective but also valid and sustainable at the grassroots level.



**Figure 3**

*An Illustration of the Perceived Causes of Conflict in the Region*

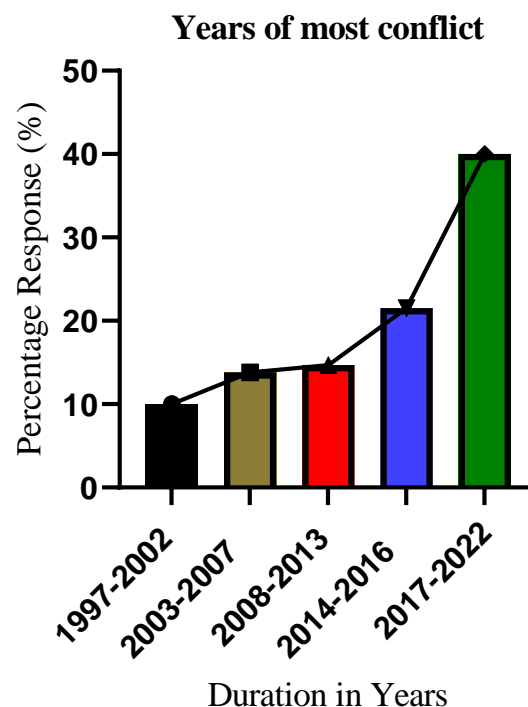
#### 4.4 Periods Marked by the Most Intense Conflict

Respondents were asked to indicate the period they felt had experienced the most inter-ethnic conflict. A majority of the respondents that is 160 (40.0%) stated the period between the years 2017-2022 as the most violent. This recent time appears to have been characterized by heightened hostilities. The recurrent cattle raids and heightened insecurity, have deepened a worsening community relations. Moreover, this has affected the efficacy of conflict mitigation efforts. The 2014-2016 period was also mentioned by a total of 86 (21.5%) respondents as a time when there was increased conflict. This is consistent with the build-up to the more violent post-2017 era. Previous time periods were cited less often. A total of 59 respondents (14.6%) selected 2008 to 2013 as a period of heightened conflict while 55 respondents (13.8%) selected 2003 to 2007. Additionally, 40 respondents (10.0%) selected 1997 to 2002 as the time with the most conflict. These findings are illustrated graphically in Figure 4 below.

These results reflect a strong pattern where the respondents by far label current years, particularly the last decade, as the most violent and destructive experience of conflict. Such a perception of growing violence over time is also in line with overall regional and national trends. For instance, Schilling *et al.* (2012) reported a rise in pastoralist conflict in Northern Kenya from the early 2010s. This was attributable to increased environmental pressure, competition for declining resources. It is further associated with the breakdown of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms (Schilling *et al.*, 2012). The prominence on reported conflict in the 2017–2022 period could also reflect the political instability around national elections. These areas have previously been hotspots for ethnic mobilisation and insecurity. This is echoed by Kubin & von Sikorski (2021), who observed how violence between communities becomes more intense during and after election times, especially in counties with contested borders and unresolved historical grievances (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). Turkana and West Pokot, on their part, have witnessed numerous land-related conflicts, access to resources and administrative boundaries all of which are amplified during politically charged times.

Moreover, the observed increase in conflict is in accordance with earlier research on the proliferation of small arms, a situation always brought out by Mkutu (2007) and replicated in this study. Militarization of the local groups not only increased the number of attacks but also amplified their magnitude, brutality, and sophistication (Mkutu, 2007). The overrepresentation of post-2017 responses may therefore also be the consequence of more frequent exposure to better-armed, more organized groups of raiders as well as decreasing efficacy of state- and community-run peacebuilding organizations. Another factor to consider is the changing socio-economic setting in pastoralist regions over the last decade. The post-2010 decentralization of authority, though offering local development opportunities, has also increased inter-county rivalry and ethnicized management of resources, as noted in KHRC (2018) research (KHRC, 2018). In Turkana and West Pokot, among other areas where political and ethnic boundaries often align with ecological boundaries, such competition has the potential to trigger and sustain violent conflict.

The relatively lower reporting of previous phases of conflict (1997–2013) suggests that while past grievances persist, new drivers such as access to weapons, competition for resources, and governance collapse are increasingly shaping the way communities perceive and experience conflict. This chronology of perceptions highlights the need for peace interventions grounded in history but focused on the future, especially in explaining the recent intensification of violence and its structural enablers. The results show an increasing trend of severity of conflict with the majority of the respondents identifying post-2017 as the most unstable. As Figure 4 illustrates, this trend underscores the imperative need for successful peacebuilding interventions, enhanced state presence, and development policies that pursue sustainable development with a view to addressing the socio-political and environmental causes of inter-ethnic conflict.



**Figure 4**  
Showing years and Frequency of Conflict

#### 4.5 Community Perceptions on the Escalation, Impact and Resolution of Conflict

The study explored how far the prevailing inter-ethnic conflict has penetrated the daily existence, socio-economic condition, and mindset of victims in Kenya's North-Western Province. Asked if conflict had become a part of everyday life, 172 respondents (43.1%) disagreed strongly. This suggested that despite the ever presence and visibility of conflict, people do not view it as a normal and accepted condition of life. A total of 71 respondents (17.7%) strongly agreed, 43 (10.8%) agreed, 52 (13.1%) were undecided. Sixty-two (15.4%) disagreed, indicative of a diversity of lived experiences and internalized perceptions of violence. Such a subtle feeling is in line with research by Greiner (2013), where despite conflict fatigue having the tendency to desensitize populations over time, many still yearn for normalcy and the exclusion of violence as an endemic way of life (Greiner, 2013). In terms of problem-solving ability at the community level, 206 individuals (51.5%) firmly agreed that they could solve their own problems, with 71 (17.7%) agreeing and a mere 114 (28.4%) collectively disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. This is a rather affirmative view of social resilience and local agency in tune with empirical studies by McAreavey (2022) who explained that customary institutions as well as local leadership had to play roles of facilitating as well as settling conflict in societies among pastoralists (McAreavey, 2022). Robust community decision-making bodies can then be leveraged towards encouraging bottom-up and local-led peacebuilding programs.

When asked if they felt the intensity of fighting increased, 221 (53.1%) strongly agreed violence increased with the passing of time, 92 (23.1%) agreed, and only 3 (0.8%) disagreed. This reflects a common feeling of growing insecurity, particularly in more recent times, and aligns with wider conflict trends evidenced by studies by Schilling *et al.* (2012) and Morogo (2022), who identified more frequent and intensive conflict within Kenya's arid and semi-arid zones (Morogo, 2022; Schilling *et al.*, 2012). These sentiments are seen in Figure 5, but also capture the general consensus on the trajectory of the conflict and its impact on social and economic activity by the populace. The human cost was also generally witnessed.

A teacher from Turkana observed that;

*"Children draw guns and blood when asked to draw anything from home. They don't know peace. Some students cry when there's a loud bang they've been traumatized by past attacks."*

Similarly, health workers from Amudat, Turkana stated in an interview that;

*"We see many cases of depression, especially among youth and women. PTSD is real here, but few services exist. The scars may not be visible, but they are deep."*

A total of 286 individuals (71.5%) strongly agreed that many lives had been lost as a consequence of the violence, with 102 (25.4%) agreeing to this, showing general knowledge of deaths. This mirrors trends in previous studies by Mkutu (2007), which indicated high levels of death and retaliatory murders with cattle raids and militia activity in pastoral areas (Mkutu, 2007). Despite these tragic realities, however, the populace's level of desire for peace was off the charts: 305 respondents (76.2%) highly supported the assertion that they were willing to find conflict resolution, and 86 (21.5%) supported it. These findings are in line with Mercy Corps (2024), which found very high levels of willingness among pastoralist youth and elderly to participate in peace and dialogue activities, provided they are inclusive and address the root causes of violence (Mercy Corps, 2024).

The socio-economic impact of conflict was also strongly indicated. In education, 256 (63.8%) of the respondents strongly agreed and 135 (33.8%) agreed that insecurity had significantly interrupted learning in the area. This is supported by Salha (2024), which referenced that frequent displacement and school closures in conflict-affected areas diminish not just access, but the quality of education too (Salha *et al.*, 2024). In terms of economy, 252 participants (63.1%) also stated they agreed strongly that livelihood and earning a living were affected by conflict, and 105 (26.2%) agreed. These responses confirm what has been reported in the literature as the "conflict-poverty trap" a self-reinforcing cycle where violence stifles development, which reinforces the causes of even more conflict. Social bonds between communities have also been destroyed. 348 (87%) of respondents strongly agreed that social cohesion had been eroded by conflict, 89 (22.3%) agreed, and few disagreed. These mindsets reflect the disruptive effects of protracted insecurity on trust, mobility, communal relations, and inter-ethnic relations, which are pivot points for resilience and recovery.

Response from a mixed group of locals in Kapenguria, West-Pokot is that;

*"We have used old-style justice before when correctly done, it brings peace. The council of elders can mediate if they are respected by all sides."*

Moreover, an NGO worker stated that;

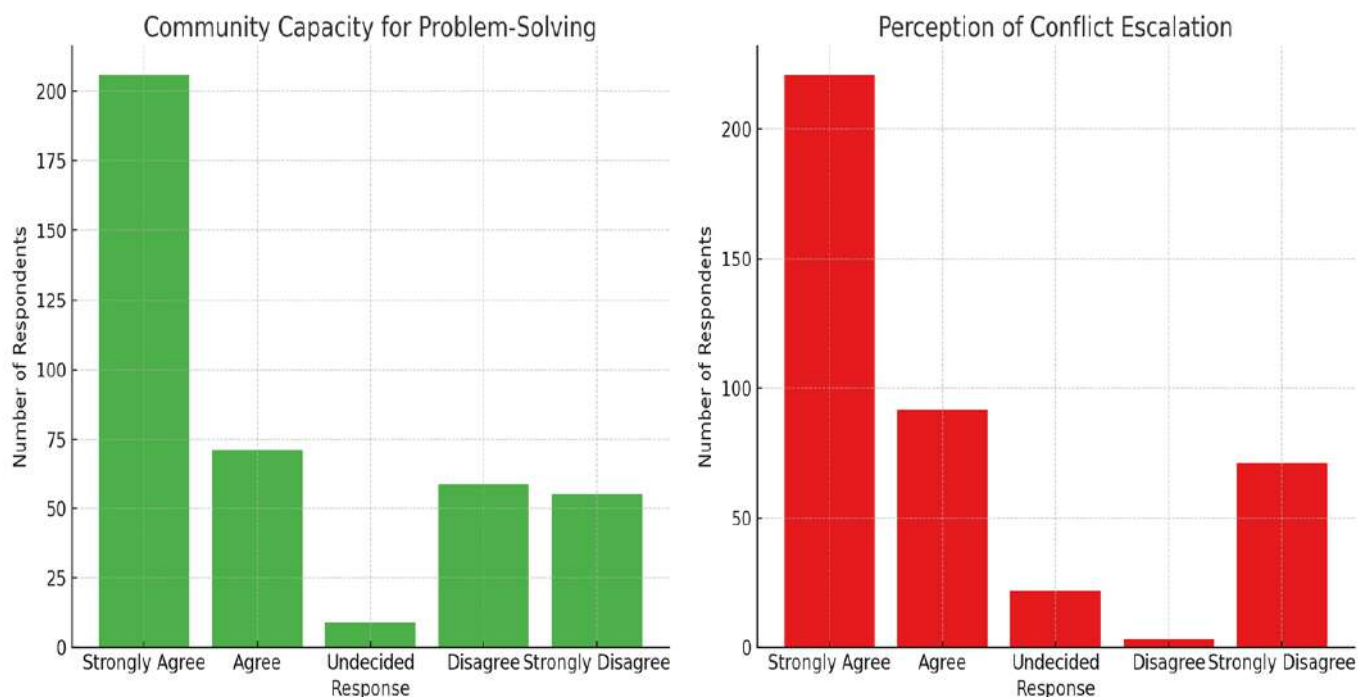
*"We've seen progress when communities take ownership of peace processes. Youth training, animal tagging and joint sports have brought both sides together. It is usually at times temporarily"*

Ford *et al.* (2020) state that the erosion of social bonds, particularly where ethnic identity coincides with competition over resources, contributes to the vulnerability of peace efforts (Ford *et al.*, 2020). When structural and cultural causes that instigate conflict were cited, attendees listed an entire gamut of structural and cultural causes. Among them were obsolete cultural practices, exclusion of mosques and schools, poverty, polygamy, and raids on cattle. Others listed with terrific frequency were famine, lack of police patrols, tribalism, youth unemployment, illiteracy, land



disputes, inferior infrastructure, retaliatory attacks, and a general sense of insecurity and instability. These cumulative factors underpin UNDP (2022) and KHRC (2018) claims that conflict in pastoralist areas is not sporadic but is systemic on the basis of both past marginalization and current governance failure (KHRC, 2018; UNDP, 2022).

The findings of this study validate previous research yet bring localized understanding to the ways in which conflict is perceived and experienced by peoples in Turkana and West Pokot. The proof reveals that communities, although still very much affected by the economic, social, and human toll of the war, also have a keen yearning for peace and in their capacity for problem-solving. Faced with these challenges therefore requires holistic, community-based approaches that do not only contain current conflict, but also break the cycles of violence that are perpetuated by the structural and cultural causes.



**Figure 5**

*Illustrating the Response to the Capacity for Problem Solving and Perception of Conflict Escalation*

## V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusion

The research examined the patterns and root causes of inter-ethnic conflict between Turkana and Pokot people living in Kenya's North-Western area. The research data demonstrates that the conflict continues to exist in a cyclical pattern and its intensity increased during the 2017–2022 time period which respondents identified as the most violent period. The conflict persists due to multiple structural and political factors alongside cultural and environmental elements which include rising firearm availability and state security weaknesses and resource competition and past community grievances. The research data indicates that most community members reject violence as a normal part of their everyday lives yet they experience significant social and economic consequences from the conflict. The conflict affects education and economic productivity and social cohesion the most. The respondents identified death tolls together with destroyed inter-community trust and interrupted essential services as the main consequences of the conflict. The research demonstrates that violence receives different interpretations across different regions of the study area. Cultural traditions supporting warrior status continue to thrive in Turkana County where attacks occur frequently with military characteristics. The people of West Pokot attribute their conflicts to poor governance and demonstrate less support for aggressive actions. The research shows that local communities strongly want peace to prevail while simultaneously believing they possess the ability to resolve their problems. The positive outlook about peacebuilding initiatives creates an essential chance to develop locally-based solutions which respect cultural diversity and include all stakeholders.

### 5.2 Recommendations

This study recommends a locally based and comprehensive approach to conflict management between the Pokot and Turkana people. Community-owned peace infrastructure like elders' councils, youth organizations, and women's

projects is essential in grounding conflict resolution in valued local mechanisms. These institutions need to be institutionally linked to county and national systems to ensure sustainability. Disarmament programs need to be balanced, transparent, and coupled with livelihood support to deter armed raiding, particularly for young people. Investment in public goods such as schools, water points, and markets can stimulate cooperation and decrease competition for resources of primary concern.

Where warrior valorization is embedded culturally, such as in Turkana, targeted peace education and role modeling should promote alternative masculinities on the basis of leadership, education, and entrepreneurship. At the same time, the state has to improve its security presence by augmenting law enforcement coverage, especially in remote and conflict areas, and by providing public services. Inclusive leadership and inter-county political discourse are also key to the resolution of grievances around resource allocation and representation. Political leaders must be held accountable for promoting unity rather than ethnic disintegration. Early warning systems using local intelligence and mobile phones must be established to prevent escalation. Psychosocial healing is imperative. Counseling, inter-community discussion, and traditional reconciliation ceremonies must be funded to allow communities to recover from trauma and rebuild trust. Consistent effort, participatory inclusion, and long-term investment in the structural and relational foundations of peaceful coexistence will be required to attain lasting peace in the region.

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