

REDUCING CONFLICTS THROUGH COLLABORATIVE FOREST MANAGEMENT IN THE BORANA LOWLANDS, SOUTH ETHIOPIA

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Setting the Scene

The Borana lowlands are located in the Southern part of Ethiopia and in Northern Kenya. They are largely managed as a common property resource by pastoral groups: the Boran, Guji, Burji, Arsii and Gabra Oromo clans, and by the Garri and Merihan Somali clans. These pastoral groups have diverse ethnic backgrounds but are predominantly Oromo. Lack of clear land tenure rights and arrangements cause conflicts about perceived ownership and rights of use over the Borana forests¹. Land use conflicts and competition stem from conflicts of interest between different land users (Niamir-Fuller, 2000).

Conflicts in Borana: Competing livelihoods, land tenure, land use and land management

The lowlands are predominantly semi-arid grazing areas, with isolated montane forest fragments on elevated areas. These fragile forests are subject to an increased use that leads to conflicting claims over the use of the resource. This often results in violent, armed conflict. Borana's forests play an important role in a number of livelihood options. Conflict and competition over forest resources exists on different levels, locally between Oromo and Somali clans and ethnic lines and, non-locally, with outsiders. Guiding competition over forest management boundaries and use of the

resource is key to development of forest management systems that work. Rural, urban, settled and mobile groups have different needs in terms of timber, dry season grazing and fuel wood. In addition, there are conflicts between forest user groups and the Government, represented by the Forest Department. The Forest Department still has a largely policing role, and views most forest utilisation activities as illegal.

Forest areas in the Borana lowlands represent a cause of conflict and yet they also provide a mechanism to reduce conflict and build long-lasting stability in the region by reaching agreed management practices and secured user rights between the various stakeholders.

Learning approaches to setting up new² forest resource management systems

The corner stone of the project's approach has been to develop appropriate working relationships with communities. The idea was to restore traditional institutions and management systems and help these to regain the capacity to function within today's context (Tache and Irwin, 2003). This has particular relevance to conflicts over natural resources and to newly emerging forest management systems.

A learning-based approach has been adopted to open up a dialogue over new resource management systems. This approach has three distinct stages; investigation, negotiation and implementation (Dubois and Lowore, 2000). The approach initiates a participatory process that is self-informing (investigation), provides space for key actors to discuss and decide on the structures and direction of management

(negotiation), and recognises that real learning takes place once new decisions are put in to practice (implementation).

Investigation: Addressing conflict - Relationship Mapping

Boran pastoralists perceive violent conflict over natural resources as one of the most important livelihood issues (Weiser, 1998 and SOS Sahel, 2000). To address the issue, existing conflicts were analysed first. This helps to develop an understanding of the conflict, its causes, impacts and inter-relationships, and helps determine where intervention is appropriate.

Conflict analysis was the starting point of the forest user stakeholder analysis. The purpose was to break down the complexity of existing conflicts and to initiate a dialogue from which to develop a strategic plan of action. The work involved group exercises and discussions with all stakeholders in order to understand and map their respective ideas and perceptions. Work was initially done with small groups and then with larger groups, by bringing the initial small groups together as opportunities arose, and through the identification of common interests and common ground.

The key tool used in this process was relationship mapping, adapted with Responding To Conflict (RTC, 2000) as part of a conflict training exercise. Participants were asked first to list all the different local groups using forest resources. All groups were marked on a large circle on the ground, and the participants placed themselves within the circle. Participants were encouraged to discuss and depict³ their relationships with all the other local groups. Once the exercise had been completed, the information was reviewed

and detailed explanations sought concerning relationships between different local groups.

In this way the project built up a clear understanding of relationship issues, both positive and negative, between the forest users. Dialogue over sustainable resource use, the potential for shared management and the need for conflict resolution, were embraced by community groups and institutions as opportunities to re-assume their management roles and responsibilities.

Negotiating new forest management systems and reducing conflict

These roles and responsibilities are being formalised through legally recognised community forest management plans. This is an important mechanism for clarifying user rights, responsibilities and for protecting the rights of previously marginalised groups, helping to secure livelihoods (see Longley and Maxwell, 2003). Development of the management plan includes a participatory forest resource assessment, where Government staff and forest users jointly assess the resource, define management prescriptions and establish monitoring criteria (Jordan, 2003). This helps build trust and understanding and reduces conflict between Government officials and users.

Bringing all local groups together into one management body, and into negotiations over resource management, has enabled the resolution of a number of key conflicts between different clans and different ethnic groups. The on-going dialogue has created the medium to resolve differences. For example, in and around Arero forest tensions between forest settled Borana and

Guji groups and nomadic Garri camel pastoralists that often resulted in violent conflict, have now been resolved. Since the new forest management system is in place, agreement has been reached over the need to negotiate access to the forest, rather than to follow the previous assumed open access.

Inter-*Madda*⁴ and *Madda* forest management groups include representatives from different clans and ethnic groups. These are set up as ground level forest management bodies. They deal with local problems and conflicts, e.g., they stop illegal harvesters from within the community. More serious problems or potential conflicts, e.g., new farmland clearances, are passed on to the District level PFM working group, for higher level negotiation and support. PFM working groups are set-up with the aim of conflict resolution and embody representatives of local communities and Government officials.

Potential disputes and conflicts of interest between different groups involved in the new management will continue to arise. In shifting from an open access system to a managed access system, a number of forest users must work under restrictions, with inherent problems. However, armed and violent conflict appears to have been largely eliminated as negotiation processes take place.

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¹ This situation is relevant for the entire Borana Lowlands.

² The word new should be interpreted as an integration of tradition and modern management systems.

³ In order to depict relationships the participants used different lines (straight, double, broken etc) to indicate their relationship (strong, weak, conflict, etc.) with a specific group.

⁴ Madda is a Borana traditional territorial unit of area. It is roughly equivalent to the Government peasant association (PA) land division.