



Nomadism, Land Disputes and Security

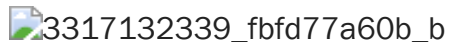
Jérémie Gilbert

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Violence between nomads and sedentary populations has become widespread across the globe and there is an urgent need to address the root causes of this escalation of violence.

Conflicts between nomadic and sedentary communities are [increasing](#). Control over the use of land and natural resources is very often at the heart of these conflicts, which are becoming a common occurrence in much of [West](#), [Central](#) and [East Africa](#). In [Nigeria](#) the escalation of violent incidents between nomadic Fulani herdsman and sedentary farmers has reached such a level that it is seen as more dangerous than the exactions of Boko Haram. This is not limited to Africa as there are also increased levels of conflicts between nomadic pastoralists and sedentary farmers in [India](#), [Pakistan](#), [Afghanistan](#), [Yemen](#), [China](#), [Tibet](#), and [Mongolia](#). Violent clashes between nomads and sedentary populations have become widespread across the globe. In light of this, understanding the causes of these conflicts and clashes is essential in order for effective remedial initiatives to be found.

Agriculture, Climate Change and Sedentarisation



Nomadic homes of the Dassanech tribe in Ethiopia. Image Carsten ten Brick via [Flickr](#).

There are several different factors behind this increase of conflicts. The spreading of agriculture, nature conservation areas, oil and mineral extraction, and tourism, are putting increased pressure on the territories traditionally used by nomadic communities for transhumance, grazing and sources of livelihoods.

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As summarised by Elliot Fratkin, a leading expert on pastoralism, these threats include “the expansion of farmers, ranchers, and game parks on their lands; the privatisation, commodification, and subdivision of the range; the growth of cities, the outmigration of poor pastoralists to urban areas, and dislocations brought about by drought, famine, and political conflict“. Climate change is another non-negligible factor pushing for increased competition on the control of lands and natural resources. In recent decades, changes in climate patterns have led to extreme situations of drought pushing for changes of transhumant routes and modification in pastoral migration patterns. The [Security in Mobility Initiative](#) observes that: “The increase in frequency and length of drought cycles has forced herders to move more frequently, often to new destinations for extended periods. This adaptive trend has gone hand in hand with an increase in inter-communal conflict.”

All these factors are contributing to daily increases of disputes between sedentary and nomadic communities, including destruction of crops, over-grazing of land, indiscriminate bush burning, cattle theft and straying of cattle. These daily occurrences can sometimes lead to more serious escalations of violence as some of the recent conflicts have shown. For example, the report of the [International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur](#) highlighted that one of the main contributing factors to the conflict in the Darfur region was “the competition between various tribes, particularly between sedentary tribes and nomadic tribes over natural resources as a result of desertification.” This tragically led to the multiplication of extremely violent raids against sedentary villagers, and the destruction of ancestral patterns of cooperation that had previously governed the relationship between the different groups. This is only a single illustration of a common regional pattern as indeed, pastoralist-

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sedentary tensions are a common element in many of conflict areas, as seen in Uganda, Kenya, Southern-Sudan, Ghana, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Somalia.

These conflicts are not only based on competition to access natural resources, as very often there are some deeply embedded tensions between nomadic and sedentary communities, which is reflected in the lack of inclusion and respect for nomadism in political, economic and legal institutions. Governmental agencies and developmental organisations often view nomadism as an anachronism, or a primitive way of life, which needs to be 'modernised'. A predominant perception is that nomadism was a primitive form of civilisation and that humankind has developed into a more 'civilised' settled form of life. This is often transformed into very aggressive forms of forced sedentarisation, which means the settling of a nomadic population. Whilst these forceful forms of imposed sedentarisation have started to be challenged at the international level, their legacy is still felt at the local levels where many agencies (public and private) are still pursuing forceful imposed policies of sedentarisation ('development through sedentarisation'). This not only creates serious resentment from the nomads but also creates extreme pressure points with their sedentary neighbours.

Marginalisation, Land Insecurity and Invisibility

Most nomadic communities are facing a lack of access to education, poor healthcare and economic marginalisation, often leading to breakdown in traditional modes of living and further marginalisation. The lack of land security is an important factor contributing to nomads increased marginalisation and insecurity. Traditionally, most nomadic communities rely on customary systems of communal land usage that are usually not recognised by State authorities. Most governments have adopted an approach based on western individualistic

land tenure systems, favouring private ownership. Consequently, nomadic peoples' mobile and collective patterns of land tenure are not recognised. Most national land tenure systems are supporting sedentary forms of land usage as they rely on the colonial concept of 'productive use of the land'. Under this approach, farmers, settled agriculture, and other intensive forms of land usage are the only forms of recognised land tenure.

Whilst there have been there has been some positive evolutions to challenge this predominant sedentary vision of land tenure rights – with examples of the adoption of 'Pastoral Code' in [Mauritania](#) and [Niger](#) recognising access to grazing resource and migratory routes – generally nomadic peoples' rights to land are not recognised under the formal land management regulations. More generally, most legal systems across the globe primarily support a sedentary approach to citizenship and justice: to get citizenship one needs a permanent abode, and to get access to justice one needs a permanent residency.

International law has not fared any better as in general nomadic peoples have remained peripheral to the development of international law. Worst still is the fact that nomadic peoples have generally been the victims of rules governing title to territory and sovereignty that have been developed [under dominant sedentary principles](#). Under international human rights law, [there have been some positive evolutions](#) acknowledging the need to recognise the specificity of nomadic peoples' rights, such as mobile education or access to water resources. But in general nomadic people find very little protection under the international system of human rights. Even the ever-expanding legal regime to protect indigenous peoples has not integrated the specific demands and needs of nomadic communities. For example, the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), which was adopted in 2007 by the United Nations General Assembly, does not mention nomadism or nomadic peoples.

Thinking more broadly in terms of international politics and international relations, nomadic peoples are nearly invisible. At a time when conflicts between nomads and sedentary communities are on the rise, this invisibility and lack of access to international politics is problematic. The voices of the nomads are not heard, or even considered. Civil society organisations have tried to remedy such invisibility in supporting the emergence of a 'global nomadic movement'. This has notably resulted in the adoption of the [Dana Declaration on Mobile Peoples and Conservation](#) in 2002 and in the [Segovia Declaration of Nomadic and Transhumant Pastoralists](#) in 2007. These two declarations, developed with the inputs and direct participations of representative of nomadic and pastoralist organisations, represent significant advocacy documents calling for more visibility in international law and politics.

A Way Forward?

The threat to nomadic peoples, and nomadism as way of life, is global. The danger is not only that humankind could lose precious cultural and social assets, but also that it could suffer the loss of a very sustainable way of life. For centuries nomadism and mobility in the use of natural resources has ensured a sustainable access to sources of livelihood for many nomadic communities who often live in very fragile and harsh environments. Pushing these communities outside these zones creates serious environmental strains on areas of the globe that cannot sustain an extensive sedentary use of the resources. There is an urgent need to recognise the rights of the nomads to perpetuate their way of life and to maintain a mobile use of the natural resources. A clarification of the rights of the nomads over their grazing rights, demarcation of zone of transhumance, and recognition of their access to water sources would contribute to alleviate the escalating tensions. The overemphasis on

agriculture, the lack of recognition of grazing rights, and the loss of their territories are all contributing factors pushing several nomadic groups to engage into violence. Not that violence is ever justified, but there is an urgent need to address the root causes of this escalation of violence. From this perspective there is a need from the international community, but also state authorities and developmental agencies, to actively engaged with nomads and ensure their inclusion in a fair and participative manner to the regulations regarding land tenure and the use of natural resources. As it has been seen recently in several West and East African countries, paramilitary groups and terrorist organisations can often thrive on these tensions and turn these into full-scale violent conflicts.

Jérémie Gilbert is Professor in International and Comparative Law at the University of East London (UK). He has published various books, articles and book chapters on the rights of indigenous peoples, looking in particular at their right to land. His latest monograph is ‘Nomadic Peoples and Human Rights’ (Routledge, 2014). He has worked with several indigenous communities across the globe and has served as a consultant for several international organisations. He was one of the invited independent experts for United Nations Expert Seminar on Treaties and other arrangements between States and Indigenous Peoples, and was a consultant for the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Contact: Jeremie.gilbert@uel.ac.uk

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