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Climate Shocks, Resource Scarcity, and Conflict: The Turkana-Pokot Violence in Kenya's Fragile Borderlands

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate how climate shocks influence the dynamics of conflict between the Turkana and Pokot communities in Kenya. The research was grounded on Homer Dixon's environmental Scarcity theory (EST). The research design used in this study was a mixed-methods research design, which was a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods of research. More than that, the research used secondary and primary data collection. The primary data was gathered from a sample of 130 participants through questionnaires and key informants (KIIs). Descriptive statistics and thematic content analysis were used in analysing the collected data. The research observed that climate shock is one of the major contributors to an escalation of intercommunal tensions due to i) the creation of resource shortage, ii) interference with pastoralist livelihoods, and iii) inciting territorial encroachment. The study also established that these stressors are combined with the pre-existing structural weaknesses, such as poor institutions, to worsen the local tensions into violent conflict. The article shows that environmental destruction does not directly lead to the occurrence of violence, but when it is combined with weak governance and economic deprivation, an outcome of conflicts can be achieved. In the absence of specific measures, climate shocks will remain a force multiplier to conflict in an area that has been characterized by fragility and insecurity.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, climate change has surged to the forefront of global concern. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2023) warns that every fraction of a degree of additional warming will rapidly intensify risks to people and ecosystems. As cited in Boehm and Schumer (2023), United Nations Secretary General António Guterres described these risks as an "atlas of human suffering and a damning indictment of failed climate leadership." Climate change is no longer a distant environmental issue; it is a present-day crisis shaping political, economic, and humanitarian landscapes worldwide. Its effects are particularly severe in ecologically fragile and politically marginalized regions. This article examines how such climate shocks influence violent conflict dynamics between the Turkana and Pokot communities in Kenya.

Climate shocks refer to sudden or prolonged deviations from normal climate patterns. According to De la Fuente (2007), these events negatively affect ecological systems and undermine human capacity to adapt to socio-economic and political change. Climate shocks generally fall into two broad categories: rapid-onset events (such as tropical cyclones, flash floods, wildfires, and heatwaves) and slow-onset processes (for example, extended drought and progressive sea-level rise). Both forms of shock inflict profound damage. According to IPCC (2023), climate shocks i) disrupt ecosystems and biodiversity, ii) undermine livelihoods, health, and well-being, iii) degrade infrastructure and urban settlements, iv) destabilize food production, and v) strain water availability. The IPCC report further pointed out that these adverse effects are already more extensive and extreme than anticipated across the globe. These global trends underscore the urgent need to investigate how climate shocks manifest at regional and community levels.

Climate-shock-conflict (CSC) nexus has emerged as a topical issue of concern in both current academic and policy circles. Although it has been reported that there is a positive relationship between climate shocks and the risk of greater conflict, the same is not consistent and is affected by various social, political, and economic variables. This complexity aligns with the argument by Scheffran (2020) that climate shocks can be regarded as threat multipliers, and they do not directly lead to conflict but increase any pre-existing vulnerabilities and tensions, especially those within the fragile socio-political contexts. He further warns that the presence and the power of the CSC nexus are controversial because of regional drift.

Although in the global literature there exist few studies, a greater number of studies are needed about the influence of climatic shocks on the dynamics of communal violence in the African drylands, most specifically northern Kenya. Existing studies often generalize across the Horn of Africa or focus exclusively on socio-political drivers. In essence, there is a neglect of the nuanced interplay between climate shocks and intercommunal conflict at the sub-national level.

This study seeks to bridge the gaps mentioned above by examining how climate shocks influence economic,

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political, socio-cultural, and historical tensions to produce violent outcomes in the Turkana-Pokot region of Kenya. It focuses on a key question: To what extent, and through which pathways, do climate shocks exacerbate the frequency and intensity of conflict between the Turkana and Pokot communities? Understanding this linkage is vital because, without context-specific insights, interventions may be either misaligned or ineffective. Consequently, this article offers a detailed analysis of how climate shocks shape conflict behavior among the Turkana and Pokot communities in northwestern ASAL areas in Kenya.

Climate Vulnerability in Northern Kenya

According to NDMA (n.d.), Kenya's ASALs cover roughly 89% of the country's landmass, are home to about 38% of its population, and account for 70% of its livestock herd. Counties in the ASAL, like Turkana and West Pokot counties, experience high climate variability, frequent and severe droughts, and limited infrastructural development. Such circumstances make them special targets of climate shocks. Pastoralism is the major livelihood system within the ASALs. The livestock herding economic activity is reported to be making up 65 to 80 percent of household incomes in the ASALs, as indicated by NDMA (n.d.). It is also a cultural pillar and a type of wealth, status, and social security according to Githu *et al.* (2022). Nevertheless, pastoralism in ASALs is mobile and climate-sensitive in nature. The economic activity is threatened by climate shocks, i) causing decreased availability of pasture, ii) depletion of water resources, and iii) increased deaths of livestock. Particularly, a study in West Pokot has shown that more than 70 percent of households experienced loss of more than half of their herds because of the drought in 20172018 (Muricho *et al.*, 2019).

Researchers such as Akall (2021) and Muricho *et al.* (2019) also observed that there has been a rise in the rate and magnitude of climate events in the regions of Turkana and West Pokot Counties over recent decades. Droughts that used to take place once in a decade are now taking place every few years, and rains have become unpredictable and inadequate. This has led to long-distance movements as herders seek some suitable grazing areas and watering places. These migrations tend to traverse both ethnic and administrative borders, hence creating the ground for competition over resources and land conflicts. Lack of formalized systems in resource sharing or intact upstream migration corridors escalates the chances of conflict. Moreover, the low role of the state in borderlands limits the capacity to resolve conflicts or react to violence (Akall, 2021). Such structural marginalization (when coupled with ecological pressure) provides an ideal breeding area for climate-related conflicts, especially along the Turkana-Pokot corridor.

The Turkana-Pokot Conflict

Turkan and Pokot communities reside in Turkana and West Pokot Counties in Kenya, respectively. The conflict between these two pastoralist communities is among the most protracted and volatile in Kenya. The conflict-prone areas include borderline areas of the two counties, such as the Pokot North Sub-County and Pokot Central Sub-County in West Pokot County, and Turkana South Sub-County and Loima Sub-County in Turkana County (Shalom-SCCRR, 2020). According to Osinde *et al.* (2023), these conflicts date back generations and have traditionally revolved around cattle raiding, land access, and ethnic identity. In the past, cattle raids were often symbolic and governed by customary norms. However, in recent years, this dynamic has shifted dramatically. Wanyonyi *et al.* (2025) noted that the contemporary Pokot-Turkana conflict episodes are increasingly lethal, militarized (owing to the proliferation of small arms in the region), and politically charged.

According to Gupta *et al.* (2023), the spatial geography of conflicts in Kenya's ASALs overlaps significantly with areas hit hardest by climate shocks. The Pokot-Turkana conflict is no different. During periods of prolonged droughts, migration corridors become contested zones, and competition over shrinking resources often escalates into armed confrontations between the Turkana and Pokot communities (International Organization for Migration Kenya Country Office, 2023). However, efforts to address these conflicts have not had long-term success. The Pokot-Turkana conflict persists due to three main reasons: the root causes remain unaddressed, government interventions have been ineffective, and peace efforts by the Catholic Church have lacked impact due to limited community engagement and follow-through (Shalom-SCCRR, 2021).

This article examines climate shocks as a structural catalyst within the broader ecology of violence in the Turkana-Pokot corridor. It analyzes both direct effects and indirect effects to understand how environmental stressors aggravate communal tensions in this region. While climate is not the sole driver of conflict in the region, this article argues that it is increasingly an unavoidable factor that interacts with governance vacuums, historical grievances, and economic marginalization to create a volatile mix.

Theoretical Underpinning

This article is grounded on Homer-Dixon's Environmental Scarcity Theory (EST). This theory posits that environmental scarcity can contribute to conflict, especially in vulnerable regions with weak institutional capacity and deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities. Homer-Dixon (2010) identified three principal sources of environmental scarcity. First, supply-induced scarcity (which results from the degradation or depletion of environmental resources such as arable land, water, and forests). Second, demand-induced scarcity. This is driven by population growth or rising resource consumption. Third, structural scarcity. This scarcity stems from unequal social distribution of resources. According to EST, these three forms of scarcity often interact, leading to resource capture by powerful groups and ecological

marginalization of weaker or minority populations. The resulting grievances and competition intensify social tensions and contribute to violent conflict (Homer-Dixon, 2010).

Homer-Dixon's model is particularly relevant in the Turkana and West Pokot context, where climate shocks serve as a trigger for structural, supply-induced, and demand-induced scarcities. The outcome is a zero-sum scenario in which communities are forced into territorial and resource-based competition and conflicts. EST does not claim that environmental scarcity alone causes violence, but that it interacts with existing political, economic, and social vulnerabilities to increase the probability of conflict. This is particularly relevant in the Kenyan context, where ethnic identity is often politicized, and where climate resilience and peacebuilding policies remain underdeveloped in peripheral regions. Consequently, the theory allows this study to move beyond simplistic cause-and-effect assumptions. Instead, the theoretical underpinning enables the article to investigate how climate shocks interact with institutional weaknesses, population pressure, and historical grievances to produce violent outcomes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches. This methodological combination enriched the study's internal and construct validity by capturing both statistical patterns and the lived experiences of affected communities. The research was conducted in selected areas in Turkana and West Pokot Counties, along the Turkana-Pokot border region. The target population included community elders, local government administrators, security personnel, pastoralist representatives, civil society actors, and officials from relevant ministries such as the Ministry of Interior and the State Department for ASALs and Regional Development.

Given the absence of a fixed sampling frame, Cochran's formula for infinite populations was used to determine an appropriate sample size. After adjusting for resource and logistical considerations, a final sample of 130 participants was selected using stratified random sampling and purposive sampling techniques to ensure diverse stakeholder representation. Primary data were collected through semi-structured questionnaires (n=94) and key informant interviews (n=21). This yielded a response rate of 88% (115 out of the 130 participants completed the survey). In addition, secondary data were sourced from academic literature, online sources, government reports, and institutional publications. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data underwent thematic content analysis.

Discussion/ Analysis of Findings

This section presents the key findings of the study on how climate shocks influence the Turkana-Pokot conflict. Data collected through KIIs, questionnaires, and secondary sources reveal that climate shocks serve as both direct and indirect catalysts for violent conflict in the region. Four core themes emerged as dominant pathways: resource scarcity, livelihood disruption, territorial encroachment, and institutional deficiencies.

These pathways create feedback loops that transform environmental stress into violent conflict between the Turkana and Pokot communities. Table 1 below summarizes the frequency and percentage of responses identifying each of these drivers. It offers a quantitative snapshot of the most commonly perceived causes of climate-induced conflict.

Table 1: Reported Drivers of Turkana Pokot Conflict Influenced by Climate Shocks

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Resource Scarcity	38	33.0
	Livelihood Disruption	29	25.2
	Institutional Deficiencies	21	18.3
	Territorial Encroachment	27	23.5
	Total	115	100.00

Source: Author (2025)

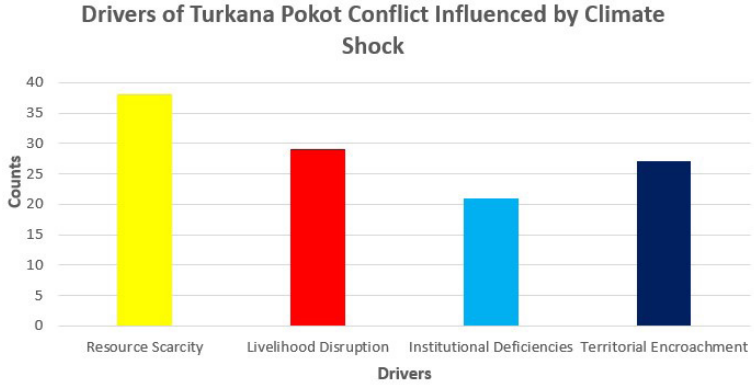

Figure 1: Drivers of Turkana Pokot Conflict Influenced by Climate Shock
Source: Author (2025)

Resource Scarcity as a Catalyst for Conflict

One of the most consistent findings across respondents and documents was the acute scarcity of water and pasture during prolonged droughts and unpredictable rainfall seasons. 33% of respondents reported that climate shocks (especially multi-season droughts) had reduced the availability of grazing land and watering points. Satellite and remote-sensing data confirm that Turkana and West Pokot counties have experienced significantly below-average rainfall (with increased variability) and reduced vegetation cover in recent years, particularly during the 2017–2018 and 2020–2021 drought cycles (Makokha *et al.*, 2024; Munyaka *et al.*, 2024; Rwigi *et al.*, 2024). In such conditions, conflict arises when competing pastoral communities converge on dwindling resources (water and pasture), often within shared or contested zones. Herders from both Turkana and Pokot communities migrate toward remaining water sources or greener pastures, especially along seasonal rivers or wetlands like the Turkwel River Basin. This leads to tension and confrontation due to competition for the scarce resources. This is consistent with Von Uexkull and Buhaug's (2021) and NDMA's (2022) identification of "resource scarcity" as one of the core pathways to conflicts in the CSC nexus. A Pokot pastoralist in West Pokot remarked:

"We used to graze separately. But now, when the rain fails, we all move to the same places. And we meet with anger and guns." (KII3, 2025)

This finding directly aligns with supply-induced scarcity in Homer-Dixon's model. As environmental resources are depleted by climate shocks, their perceived value increases, and so does the competition for control. Without clear agreements or shared management systems, this competition often escalates into violent clashes, especially where territorial boundaries are contested.

Livelihood Disruption

A second major finding (according to 25.2% of the study's participants) is that climate shocks severely disrupt pastoralist livelihoods and expose pastoralists to increased economic desperation and willingness to engage in violence. Pastoralism is the backbone of the Turkana and Pokot economies. However, this source of livelihood is climate-sensitive. As climate shocks intensify, water points dry up, pastures decline, and livestock mortality increases, leading to household-level economic collapse. Pastoral communities face hunger and lose a significant portion of their livestock during the prolonged droughts. A report by NDMA (2022) approximated that Kenya's ASALs had a livestock mortality of over 2.4 million as of May 2022 and a decline in livestock-dependent incomes due to the 2020-2022 drought. The report also pointed out that the drought had intensified food insecurity, with West Pokot County being classified as "Stressed" while Turkana County was classified as "Crisis" as per the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC). In essence, climate shocks like drought adversely affect the livelihoods of the pastoralist communities. Without livestock, many pastoralist families face hunger, loss of income, and social dislocation.

Coping strategies among the affected pastoral communities may further worsen the situation. For example, according to ACAPS (2022), some individuals in drought-affected communities (particularly young men) resort to cattle raiding as a coping strategy. A Turkana leader shared that;

"When people lose everything to drought, they see raiding as the only way to start again. It's about survival now, not pride or tradition." (KII15, 2025)

This finding reflects the dynamics of demand-induced scarcity, where more people are depending on fewer viable resources, and traditional economic systems break down. According to Homer-Dixon (2010), livelihood collapse increases the risk of violence, especially when there are few alternative opportunities for income or government support. In the absence of adequate safety nets, violence becomes an adaptive response for the pastoralist communities, albeit a destructive one.

Wanyonyi *et al.* (2025) noted that cattle raids among the Turkana and Pokot communities were also due to other factors like revenge or retaliation, weak law enforcement, resource scarcity, and cultural norms and beliefs. There is an increasing weaponization of cattle raids in North Western ASALs in Kenya. This study's interviewees (15% of the participants) noted that cattle raids had become more violent, organized, and opportunistic under economic stress. This was also evident in a report by RECSA (2023). According to RECSA (2023), the influx of small arms and porous borders has transformed livestock raids into deadly territorial offensives, often resulting in casualties, destruction of homes, and long-term displacement. These armed cattle raids increase significantly during periods of acute drought. These are no longer traditional or symbolic but often involve the use of small arms and coordinated militia-like attacks. Homer-Dixon's framework is evident here: structural scarcity, such as unequal access to arms or protection by security agencies, combines with supply-induced scarcity to create a volatile mix. Communities with better weapons or political ties are more likely to assert dominance over scarce resources, thereby escalating conflict from survival-based competition to organized violence.

Territorial Encroachment

The third pathway identified is climate-induced territorial encroachment. This was reported by 23.5% of respondents as a common consequence of droughts and other climate shocks. Communities are forced to abandon traditional grazing areas and travel long distances, sometimes across ethnic and administrative boundaries, to access food, water, and pasture. These unplanned and desperate movements are often interpreted by host communities as territorial encroachment or aggression, especially in areas with a history of mistrust. A Turkana elder commented that;

"When Pokot herders cross into our grazing lands, we

know they are desperate. But it also feels like an invasion. We must defend our people." (KII9, 2025)

A Pokot elder added that;

"When there is no water in our valley, we must go north. But the Turkana see it as a provocation. They are also hungry and angry. That's how fighting starts." (KII22, 2025)

These quotes underscore how climate-induced migration (though a survival strategy) can provoke violent reactions when interpreted as territorial encroachment. In such instances, movement is perceived as an act of invasion or territorial aggression. This migratory tension frequently results in pre-emptive or retaliatory violence, particularly in areas without clear migration protocols or land rights. No wonder, a report by Shalom-SCCR (2020) noted that land disputes were the second most prevalent cause of intercommunal conflicts (after resource scarcity, particularly pasture) between the Turkana and Pokot. The spatial overlap between climate-stressed areas and conflict hotspots further reinforces this trend. The conflicts between the Turkana and Pokot communities due to climate-induced migration (perceived as territorial encroachment) illustrate structural scarcity, where unequal access to land disadvantages some groups and leads to ecological marginalization. Without equitable institutions to mediate movement and share resources, climate-induced migration becomes a driver of conflict rather than a strategy for resilience.

Institutional Deficiencies

18.3% of the study respondents acknowledged that institutional deficiencies had failed to address the climate-shock-related conflicts between the Turkana and Pokot communities. Two major themes of weak governance structures emerged. These included a weak institutional response and breakdown of traditional conflict management systems. The study revealed that Kenya's informal and formal institutions have limited capacity to prevent or mitigate Turkana-Pokot conflicts during climate crises. Despite policy frameworks such as the National Climate Change Action Plan and the creation of entities like the National Drought Management Authority (NDMA), respondents reported that interventions often arrive too late or are insufficiently localized. Only 10% of the surveyed participants expressed confidence in government responses to drought-related conflict. A key informant noted that state agencies are reactive rather than preventive, with peace-building efforts concentrated post-conflict rather than during early warning stages (KII4, 2025). This institutional neglect reflects structural marginalization, which is a pillar of Homer-Dixon's EST. According to Homer-Dixon (2010), politically peripheral regions suffer from ecological injustice and unequal access to adaptation resources. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle where climate shocks strain resources, competition escalates, violence erupts, institutions respond weakly, and communities resort to self-help measures.

The study also found that climate shocks undermine traditional governance mechanisms. Elders and peace committees historically played a vital role in negotiating migration routes and resolving disputes. However, extended climate stress has overwhelmed these structures. Communities increasingly report that elders' decisions are ignored by younger generations, especially during periods of environmental crisis when livestock losses create desperation. Interviewed chiefs and peace monitors from West Pokot and Turkana Counties reported that the urgency to access resources often outpaces the time needed for dialogue or negotiation. In addition, traditional forums have lost influence as conflict becomes more militarized, with youth groups arming themselves in anticipation of raids or encroachment. A Turkana local leader observed that "When the drought comes, even elders are helpless. The youth want action, not stories." (KII18, 2025). This aligns with Homer-Dixon's view that ecological stress contributes to institutional weakening. Such institutional deficiencies create power vacuums that violent actors exploit.

Synthesis of Findings

While each of the above themes (resource scarcity, livelihood disruption, territorial encroachment, and institutional deficiencies) operates as a distinct mechanism, the study found that they frequently interact in cyclical ways. For example: (1) Drought (climate shock) → resource scarcity → livelihood collapse → migration and encroachment → interethnic violence → further displacement. (2) Loss of livestock → increased economic stress → engagement in raiding → counter-raids → insecurity and militarization of pastoralism. The feedback loops depicted in the two conflict pathway scenarios compound the risk of conflicts. They also show that climate shocks are not isolated triggers but amplifiers of existing tensions and vulnerabilities. In particular, the erosion of traditional coping mechanisms, combined with poor state presence and weak law enforcement in the ASALs, creates a context where environmental stress can rapidly escalate into protracted Turkana-Pokot conflict. These findings strongly support Homer-Dixon's EST, which emphasises how ecological stress and weak institutions combine to generate violence.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how climate shocks influence the dynamics of conflict between the Turkana and Pokot communities in Kenya. The study found that climate shocks exacerbate intercommunal tensions by triggering resource scarcity, disrupting pastoralist livelihoods, and inducing territorial encroachment. These stressors interact with pre-existing structural vulnerabilities to escalate local disputes into violent conflict. The analysis demonstrates that environmental degradation alone does not directly cause violence; rather, it interacts with fragile governance and economic desperation to produce conflict outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION

This study recommends the following;

1. The Ministry of Environment, Climate Change, and Forestry should mainstream conflict sensitivity into all climate adaptation interventions.

2. The Ministry of Environment, Climate Change, and Forestry should establish or revive inter-ethnic natural resource management committees at the borderlands to negotiate resource use.

3. The Ministry of Environment, Climate Change, and Forestry and the Kenya Meteorological Department should expand and localize early warning systems for both climate risks and potential conflict triggers.

4. County governments, NGOs, and development agencies should implement alternative livelihoods and skills training programs to reduce reliance on livestock and incentives for raiding.

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