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LEARNING PAPER

Converging crises, fragmented responses

Climate, conflict and governance gaps in the Kenya-Ethiopia borderlands

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Executive summary

Despite a decade of policy development, institutional reform and extensive programming, the Turkana-Omo basin remains trapped in recurrent cycles of climate-driven conflict and livelihood challenges. Straddling the Kenya–Ethiopia border, this fragile borderland sustains more than 12 million people, yet longer droughts, unpredictable floods and intensifying competition over shared water points, grazing lands and fisheries continue to fuel cross-border violence. Women and youth, who bear the heaviest social and economic costs of both climate shock and conflict, remain structurally excluded from decision-making processes designed to address these challenges.

Drawing on a year-long implementation of a project that looks at the links between climate, conflict and gender equality in the Turkana-South Omo corridor, this learning paper reflects the insights gained through close engagement with communities and institutions across the Kenya–Ethiopia borderlands. Throughout the year, our team worked alongside county officials, cross-border peace structures, women's groups, community leaders and local civil society. These interactions consistently revealed that the primary barrier to building resilience in the corridor is not the absence of policies, institutions or programmes. Rather, our experience on the ground shows that governance systems remain fragmented across sectors, across borders and across formal and informal structures.

Kenya and Ethiopia both maintain robust policy frameworks addressing peacebuilding, climate adaptation and gender equality. Regional mechanisms such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)'s Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN) provide platforms for cross-border cooperation. Yet these frameworks have limited impact in practice. What we have seen repeatedly is that institutional mandates remain siloed, coordination structures remain informalised and under-resourced, and political incentives at multiple levels perpetuate the status quo instead of enabling collaborative action.

The insights generated through stakeholder consultations and policy analysis point to three areas where these governance gaps are most visible.

1. **Peace architecture exists but remains informal.** In Turkana, the County Peacebuilding and Conflict Management (PBCM) Act (2022) regulations remain pending, leaving peace committees without clear mandates, predictable funding or formal authority. In South Omo, the relationship between formal peace committees and customary governance structures remains ambiguous. At times, these systems coexist and reinforce each other, drawing on complementary strengths. However, when they offer contradictory guidance or compete for authority, implementation slows or stalls altogether. This is compounded by the fact that Kenya and Ethiopia operate under different administrative systems, meaning that there is no single institutional framework to guide cross-border coordination; instead, cooperation often depends on informal relationships that can be inconsistent or easily disrupted.

2. **Gender inclusion remains symbolic rather than transformative.** Women's exclusion in the corridor is not merely cultural but structurally embedded, enabled by informal governance systems that allow male-dominated hierarchies to control decision-making. This is exacerbated by the absence of dedicated cross-border women's platforms and by gender policies that remain pending or unbudgeted, limiting women's ability to participate meaningfully in and influence decision-making processes.

3. **Climate adaptation initiatives operate in isolation from conflict prevention and gender programming.** Climate adaptation initiatives along the corridor often approach climate stress as a technical problem requiring a technical fix. This framing misses the bigger picture: the governance, security and power dynamics that shape how communities experience and respond to climate impacts. Due to this gap, efforts to respond to climate shocks remain fragmented and poorly aligned, leaving borderland communities to contend with risks that are linked but not addressed together.

Transforming the corridor from a landscape of recurring crises to one of durable resilience requires a deliberate shift towards more integrated programming. This means formalising cross-border governance structures, such as joint cooperation mechanisms on the Omo–Turkana Basin; operationalising pending legislation, such as Turkana's PBCM Act regulations; ensuring meaningful women's leadership in all peace and climate governance spaces and structures, supported by a dedicated budget; strengthening peacebuilding systems by integrating climate information into early warning and early response; and investing in shared climate-resilient infrastructure governed through cross-border institutions. Without addressing the underlying governance fragmentation that fuels recurrent crises, isolated interventions will continue to fall short.

1. Introduction

The Turkana–South Omo corridor, situated within the broader Turkana–Omo Basin, sustains the livelihoods of more than 12 million people across Kenya and Ethiopia. It is a region where environmental stress, resource competition, conflict dynamics and gender inequality intersect in ways that deeply shape community resilience. Longer droughts, unpredictable floods and ecosystem degradation are increasing pressure on shared water points, grazing lands and fisheries. As these resources become harder to access, tensions rise, and these pressures often spill over into cross-border violence as different groups compete for what remains.

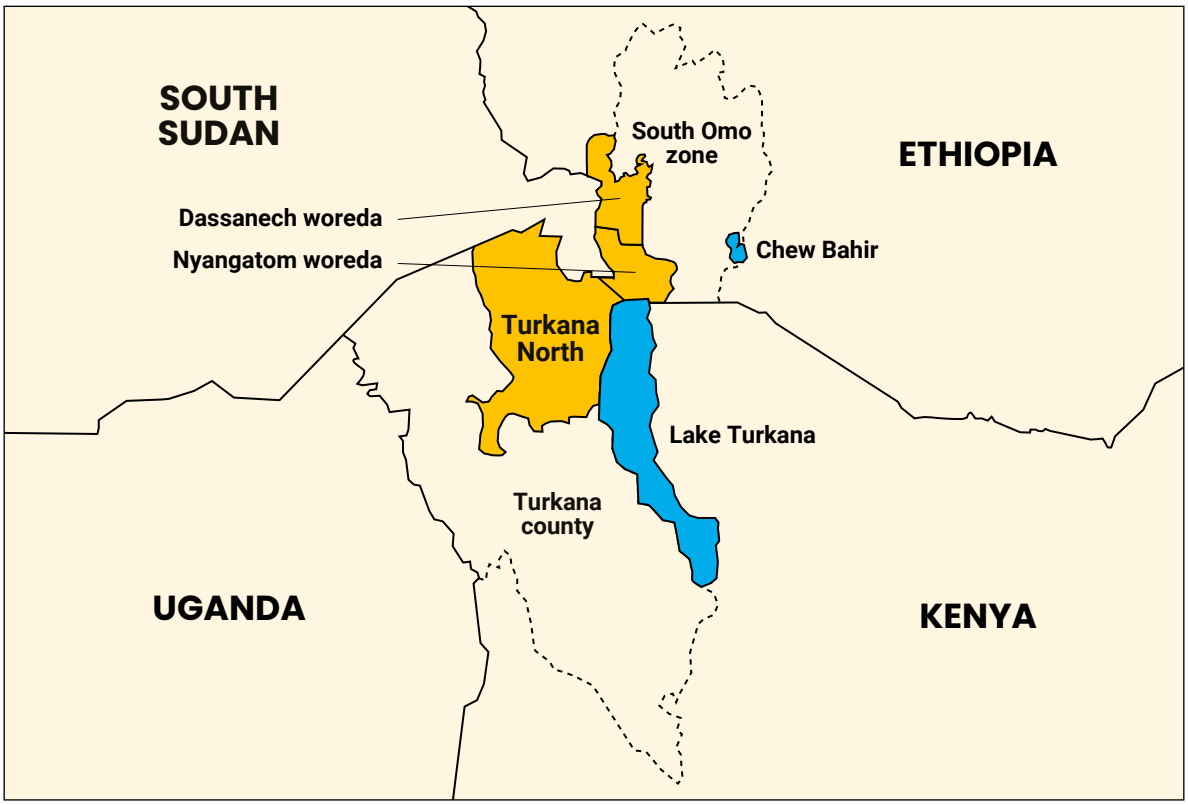
This learning paper argues that the primary barrier to resilience in the corridor is not a lack of policies, institutions or programming, but rather the fragmentation of governance systems across sectors and borders. Drawing on a year of close engagement with communities and institutions on both sides of the Kenya–Ethiopia border, the paper identifies three critical governance gaps: peace architecture that exists but remains informalised; gender inclusion that remains symbolic rather than transformative; and climate adaptation initiatives that operate in isolation from conflict prevention and gender programming. Without addressing these underlying governance failures, isolated interventions will continue to fall short.

This paper draws on stakeholder consultations conducted in Turkana county and South Omo zone as part of a year-long implementation of a project that looks at the links between climate, conflict and gender equality. The project is implemented by International Alert and partners TUPADO and EIP. The consultations employed semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with national and county/woreda government officials; peace committee members; women group leaders; civil society organisations; and development partners. These engagements were complemented by a review of relevant policy documents and literature. A political economy analysis conducted prior to and informing this paper focused on the incentives, power relations and institutional dynamics that shape governance outcomes.

The paper is divided into five parts. Following this introduction, section 2 establishes the context, examining borderland marginality, climate stress, climate security and conflict dynamics, gendered vulnerabilities and the policy landscape. Section 3 analyses sectoral and institutional gaps in peacebuilding, gender equality and climate adaptation, using the Todonyang February attack as a case study. Section 4 deepens the governance analysis, explaining why fragmentation persists, through a political lens. The final section presents strategic recommendations for national governments, regional organisations, county and woreda authorities, civil society and development partners.

2. Context: the Turkana–South Omo corridor

2.1 Borderland marginality, pastoral mobility and climate stress



The Horn of Africa's borderlands, stretching across Kenya, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda and Somalia, have historically existed at the periphery of centralised state authority. Characterised by limited public investment, fragile security dynamics and deep cross-border ethnic linkages, these regions are defined as much by mobility as by marginality.[1] Pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities sustain their livelihoods through seasonal migration, navigating ecological variability across porous international boundaries.

The Kenya–Ethiopia border exemplifies this dynamic. The Turkana–South Omo corridor links Turkana county in Northwest Kenya with the South Omo zone in Ethiopia's South Ethiopia Regional State. Mobility across this frontier is not incidental, but key to survival in arid and semi-arid environments where livestock, fishing and flood retreat agriculture depend on flexible access to water and grazing lands. Yet the international boundary creates a structural tension. What is, in ecological and social terms, a single integrated system is divided by an administrative line that separates communities with shared histories and interdependent livelihoods. The tension between ecological reality and political administration shapes how governance functions (or fails to function) in the corridor.

In recent decades, climate change has intensified existing ecological and livelihood vulnerabilities. Rising temperature extremes, increasingly erratic rainfall patterns, prolonged droughts and recurrent flooding have destabilised pastoral systems. Between 2015 and 2019 alone, an estimated 45.1 million people across the Horn of Africa required humanitarian assistance due to climate-related food insecurity.[2]

Climate projects for Eastern Africa indicate a continuation and intensification of these trends. According to the IGAD Climate Prediction and Applications Centre (ICPAC), temperatures across the Greater Horn of Africa are projected to rise, with warmer than average conditions expected across much of the region.[3] Rainfall patterns are also expected to shift: while mean annual precipitation may increase in parts of East Africa, this is likely to come with greater variability, longer wet seasons and more frequent heavy precipitation events, alongside increased risk of drought in other areas.[4] These changes place riverine and lakeshore communities at particular risk.

In the Turkana–Omo Basin, environmental stress is already evident in the form of diminishing pasturelands, drying water sources, erratic water levels in Lake Turkana and the Omo River, and declining fish stocks. Significant droughts in the Horn of Africa during 2011, 2017 and 2022 led to widespread livestock deaths. These losses diminish household wealth and weaken the ability to cope, pushing communities towards riskier survival strategies, such as migrating across borders into contested grazing zones.

These climatic stressors function as threat multipliers. In fact, there is a strong correlation between climate impacts and conflict dynamics, as climate stresses interact with historical grievances, governance gaps and socio-economic exclusion creating recurrent instability and increasing people's vulnerability. In the Turkana–Omo Basin, governance systems for equitable and sustainable natural resources and peaceful conflict management are weak and competition for scarce resources is already acute; environmental shocks deepen grievances and heighten the likelihood of violence.

Resource competition in the Lake Turkana Basin frequently drives inter-communal conflict. Pastoralist communities, including the Turkana, Nyangatom and Dassanech, frequently clash over access to water, grazing lands and fishing zones. Livestock raids, retaliatory attacks and the targeting of civilians by armed groups perpetuate cycles of revenge and displacement. Disputes are fuelled by perceptions of unequal resource distribution, demographic pressures, poverty, inadequate infrastructure and the widespread availability of small arms and light weapons.

Furthermore, water diversion upstream in the Omo River, diminishing fish populations and degradation of grazing lands intensify tensions among communities whose livelihoods are dependent on the health of their ecosystems. While conflict is not inevitable – as communities have historically navigated resource competition through customary institutions – these institutions are increasingly challenged by the convergence of environmental, demographic and political pressures. Youth and young men, in particular, who often feel excluded from decision-making processes that are

dominated by elders, increasingly operate outside customary authority structures. These dynamics shape the gendered and generational dimensions of vulnerability discussed in the next section.

2.2 Gendered power dynamics and exclusion from decision-making

In this fragile environment, women and young people are more vulnerable. Women, who are primarily responsible for managing household water and food resources, face heightened challenges during droughts and displacement. The risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) significantly escalates during periods of armed raids and counterattacks and subsequent displacements.[5]

Unequal access to productive resources further entrenches gender disparities. Fishing, a critical livelihood along Lake Turkana, remains largely dominated by men and male youth, while women are typically confined to post-harvest roles, such as processing and selling fish. This unequal access, in some areas, has contributed to the persistence and reported increase of exploitative practices such as 'sex-for-fish', where women engage in transactional sexual relationships to secure access to fish or fishing opportunities.

Although women are crucial for maintaining family and community resilience, they are often excluded from formal peace processes, natural resource and climate governance, and cross-border decision-making platforms. As noted by a woman peacebuilding champion interviewed in South Omo:

> *"Women are excluded from any decision-making process at the community level. All community leaders, religious leaders and influential people are men. The first reason is cultural attitudes. In our communities, women are considered weak and unable to make decisions by themselves. Men make decisions not only on general community matters but also on women's affairs."*

Consultations underscore that this exclusion is not merely culturally but also structurally embedded. Leadership hierarchies are largely male-dominated, and the informalisation of governance systems enables this exclusion because, when structures lack formal mandates and transparent procedures, they are easier for dominant groups to control. Limited access to education, early marriage and the absence of platforms that enable women to organise, build solidarity and influence decision-making, whether at the local or cross-border levels, deepen these structural exclusions. A woman peacebuilding champion from South Omo noted:

> *"At the government level, we have established peace committees in addition to other structures like elders' committees, youth committees and grazing committees. But at the community level, the cultural barriers remain."*

Youths occupy a dual position; they are both the demographic most affected by unemployment and climate disruption, and the primary actors mobilised in cycles of violence. Yet structured alternatives for their constructive engagement in governance and conflict management remain limited. 'Sports for peace' programmes and awareness campaigns provide entry points for interaction between conflicting youth groups, but they position young people primarily as participants rather than decision-makers. The full potential of youth, many of whom are directly involved in pastoralist mobility, fishing activities and local security dynamics, to contribute meaningfully to conflict prevention and resource governance remains untapped.

2.3 Policy landscape and governance gaps

Both Kenya and Ethiopia have robust national frameworks addressing climate resilience and peacebuilding. Kenya's National Climate Change Action Plan (NCCAP) and National Peacebuilding and Conflict Management Policy and Ethiopia's Climate-Resilient Green Economy (CRGE) Strategy provide formal policy direction on these issues. Regional mechanisms, such as IGAD, through its CEWARN, have contributed to mitigating cross-border conflicts.

However, the existence of these frameworks creates a policy paradox. Implementation within the Turkana–South Omo corridor remains fragmented, not because technical solutions are unknown, but because institutional incentives work against integration. In cross-border contexts, national and sub-national mandates often overlap, limiting the extent to which county and regional governments can advance joint action independently. Cross-border coordination is ad hoc, dependent on personal relationships rather than institutionalised mechanisms. No formal basin-wide governance structure exists for managing shared water, grazing and fisheries resources. Trust deficits and inconsistent high-level engagement further constrain cooperation.

The result is a governance vacuum in which communities confront escalating climate and security risks amid overlapping but unintegrated policy regimes – each of which faces its own implementation challenges. The following section demonstrates how this fragmentation manifests across peacebuilding, gender equality and climate adaptation in the case of the February 2025 Todonyang insecurity incident.

3. Analysis: governance gaps in peace, gender and climate

Using the Todonyang incident as an illustrative case, this section examines three interconnected domains – peacebuilding, gender equality and climate adaptation – not as separate sectors but as dimensions of a single governance challenge. It demonstrates how fragmentation within each domain, and the absence of integration across them, creates conditions in which localised disputes predictably escalate into cross-border violence.

Box 1: The Todonyang incident – climate stress, livelihood competition and cross-border fragmentation

Todonyang is a border settlement in Turkana county on the northwestern shores of Lake Turkana. Located close to the Kenya–Ethiopia border and adjacent to key fishing grounds, the town sits at the intersection of shared grazing lands, water sources and fisheries that sustain livelihoods on both sides of the border. Historically, local relations have been shaped by mobility, trade, mutual dependence and recurrent episodes of intercommunal violence linked to resource pressures.

On 22 February 2025, a confrontation on Lake Turkana involving Kenyan fishermen escalated into violence. Local accounts from both sides suggest that the confrontation was connected to a chain of earlier disputes, including reports of an alleged attack in Siyes and Kachem villages (Dassanech woreda) in which Turkana fishermen were implicated. The February incident resulted in fatalities and missing persons; dozens of fishermen were initially unaccounted for as search and rescue efforts began.

Initial rescue efforts were hampered by limited communication between Kenyan and Ethiopian authorities. By 25 February, diplomatic engagement between the authorities had helped de-escalate tensions and facilitated cooperation on search operations, including allowing Kenyan security teams access to the Ethiopian side of the border. By early March, some missing fishing gear had been returned to their owners, and humanitarian assistance, supported by local authorities and the Kenya and Ethiopia Red Cross, had begun reaching affected families.

The incident had immediate ripple effects on cross-border relations. Local authorities suspended peacebuilding activities and community exchanges between Turkana and Dassanech communities to prevent further escalation. Movement and informal trade (most of which is carried out by women traders) across the Todonyang corridor also slowed significantly as security agencies focused on stabilising the area and supporting search and recovery operations.

The Todonyang attack is not an isolated incident but a symptom of systemic governance fragmentation. The analysis in this section uses this case to illuminate how gaps in peacebuilding, gender inclusion and climate adaptation interact to produce recurrent crises.

3.1 Peace and conflict management

Resource-related conflicts in the Turkana–South Omo corridor are primarily driven by competition over water, grazing land and fisheries. Consultations identified perceptions of unequal resource entitlement, inflammatory rhetoric by influential leaders, poverty, limited infrastructure, low literacy levels and the proliferation of small arms as aggravating factors. Security interventions, while sometimes necessary, frequently provide short-term containment without addressing structural drivers.

The Todonyang attack illustrates this dynamic. The dispute originated in competition over fishing grounds – a shared resource governed by no formal bilateral framework. When violence erupted, no institutionalised mechanism existed to enable rapid cross-border communication or a joint response. Rescue efforts depended on ad hoc diplomatic engagement, and peacebuilding activities were suspended entirely, revealing the fragility of informalised peace structures.

Conflict-management mechanisms in the corridor fall into three broad categories that overlap in practice:

a) Community-rooted mechanisms

Customary institutions, especially councils of elders and lineage-based mediation structures, remain central to conflict management in both Turkana and South Omo. Their authority is grounded in cultural norms, social legitimacy and negotiated compensation practices. However, their capacity to respond effectively is increasingly constrained by generational shifts, the proliferation of small

arms and mobility patterns that expose the community to rapid, cross-border incidents. In particular, customary authority over youth has weakened, as younger generations – who are often the actors mobilised in cycles of violence – increasingly operate outside traditional hierarchies.

In the Todonyang case, elders on both sides reportedly expressed a willingness to mediate, but lacked the formal mandate or security guarantees and cross-border engagement channels necessary to do so promptly.

b) Government-mandated peace structures

Government-led peace structures operate in both countries, but with different levels of formalisation.

In Turkana, the Peace Directorate works with community structures and supports peace committees across the county. Since 2014, there have been over 234 community dialogues and 1380 peacebuilding committee members have undergone sensitisation training,[6] demonstrating sustained investment. However, because the PBCM Act regulations remain pending, peace committees have not been formally constituted, so they do not have fully clarified mandates to undertake peacebuilding activities, predictable funding or formal authority. This weakens their ability to coordinate consistently, especially across borders.

In South Omo, woreda administrations have also established peace committees involving elders, herders, local security personnel and women's representatives. These committees play a meaningful role in addressing local disputes through improved communication and local agreements. Yet they face similar challenges of limited resources, inconsistent support and the absence of formal cross-border coordination pathways. During the Todonyang incident, woreda-level committees had no official mechanism for engaging their Turkana counterparts, relying instead on personal networks and national-level diplomatic intervention.

c) Civil society and external support mechanism

National and international organisations – including faith-based actors – support dialogue processes, committee formation, capacity building and cross-border engagements. As of 2024, there were 44 NGOs operating in cross-border programming across Kenya and Ethiopia. Many of these efforts contribute to improved relations and reductions in conflict incidents at the local level. However, most of these interventions are implemented through short-term, project-based cycles, without unified monitoring systems or long-term institutional anchoring. The suspension of peacebuilding activities in Todonyang, especially NGO-facilitated dialogues, demonstrates the vulnerability of projectised peacebuilding to security shocks.

The peacebuilding challenge in the corridor is not a lack of architecture but its informalisation and lack of anchoring in local practices. Peace committees and other structures exist, but without formal mandates, predictable resources or mechanisms to enforce agreements they lack sustained authority. Dialogues occur, but without institutionalisation they can be suspended by a single incident. Cross-border communication happens, but without institutionalised mechanisms it depends on personal relationships. The Todonyang attack was not a failure of peacebuilding effort but a failure of peacebuilding institutionalisation.

3.2 Gender equality: from symbolic participation to transformative inclusion

The gender policy frameworks in both areas align with international and national standards, including constitutional provisions and commitments to gender equality. However, alignment on paper has not translated into systematic implementation at county and woreda levels. In Turkana, draft gender and SGBV policies remain pending adoption, limiting formal authority and budget allocation. Gender mainstreaming with peace and climate programmes is uneven, often confined to participation quotas rather than substantive leadership roles. The Turkana gender director noted:

> *"The draft Gender Policy and SGBV Policy have been pending adoption for a long time. Without formal adoption, there is no budget allocation, no enforcement mechanism, no accountability. Gender mainstreaming becomes an aspiration rather than a requirement."*

Consultations in South Omo reveal deeper structural constraints. Women's exclusion is embedded within male-dominated religious, clan and administrative hierarchies. Cultural attitudes frequently frame women as unsuitable for public decision-making, and limited educational access further narrows leadership opportunities. No sustained cross-border women's dialogue platforms exist, making it difficult to engage in cross-border peacebuilding.

The informalisation of governance systems enables and reinforces women's exclusion. When peace structures lack formal mandates, transparent procedures and documented decision-making processes, they are easier for dominant groups (male elders in this context) to control. Formalisation is not a panacea, but the absence of formal mandates means that there are no enforceable requirements for women's inclusion, no budget lines to support their participation and no accountability mechanism when they are excluded.

In the Todonyang context, this exclusion has had real consequences. Women in fishing communities on both sides of the border hold deep knowledge of the lake dynamics, fishing patterns and informal economies that sustain households during conflict. Yet, from the local accounts, no women were involved in the initial peace discussions following the attack. Their knowledge, which might have supported more context-sensitive de-escalation efforts, remained absent in the official response efforts.

3.3 Short-term youth engagement instead of structural change

Youth engagement is visible in several community-level initiatives, particularly through 'sports for peace' programmes, public awareness campaigns and mobilisation during dialogue forums organised by local authorities and civil society organisations. While these initiatives provide entry points for interaction and confidence building, they often focus on short-term exchange and relationship building rather than on a structural change for sustained institutional participation and empowerment of youth. They tend to position young people primarily as participants or beneficiaries rather than decision-makers. Structured pathways that would enable youth to transition from these engagement platforms into formal peace committees, cross-border governance mechanisms or conflict early warning systems remain limited.[7]

This represents a missed opportunity. Youth are involved directly in pastoralist mobility, fishing activities and local security dynamics. Young men, in particular, are often the primary actors mobilised in raids and counterraids, yet they are rarely included in the peace processes that seek to address the violence in which they participate. They are often the first to observe changing resource conditions or emerging tensions. In the Todonyang case, young fishermen were the direct victims of the attack, yet no structured mechanism exists to incorporate their perspectives into early warning systems or prevention efforts.

The gender challenge in the corridor is therefore not merely one of participation, but of power and of cultural change. Shifting deeply embedded norms about who holds authority and creating space for younger generations to have a voice alongside elders requires sustained investment and political will. Without formal mandates, institutional incentives, and targeted capacity investments and cultural change, inclusion remains symbolic rather than transformative.

3.4 Climate governance: the technical trap and governance gap

Climate change in the Turkana–South Omo region manifests primarily as increased temperatures, prolonged droughts and weather unpredictability. However, understanding why these environmental pressures escalate into conflict requires moving beyond climate science to examine how governance systems (or their absence) shape community responses. This section focuses on two interrelated governance failures: the absence of effective transboundary water governance and the tendency to treat climate adaptation as a technical rather than a political and security challenge.

The hydrological governance gap

Hydrological changes in the Omo–Turkana Basin illustrate how environmental dynamics in the Turkana–South Omo corridor transcend national and sectoral governance boundaries. The ecological system linking the Omo River and Lake Turkana functions as a transboundary basin, yet governance arrangements affecting the water management, fisheries, pastoral mobility and local conflict resolution remain largely organised within national and sectoral silos.[8]

In practice, decisions related to hydropower development, irrigation expansion, fisheries management and pastoral resource access are handled by different institutions operating at multiple administrative levels in Kenya and Ethiopia. While policies and regulatory frameworks addressing water governance, climate adaptation and cross-border cooperation exist in both countries, coordination across these domains remains uneven. As a result, environmental changes affecting shared ecosystems generate livelihood pressures that are experienced locally but are addressed inefficiently and ineffectively through fragmented governance responses.

For communities in the Turkana–South Omo corridor, the key concern is often not the water infrastructure itself but the uncertainty surrounding how the hydrological changes may affect local ecosystems and resource availability.[9] Seasonal flooding in the Omo River has historically replenished grazing areas, supported flood retreat cultivation, and contributed to ecological processes that sustain fish productivity in riverine grazing zones and agricultural practices that depend on annual flood deposits. As noted by one natural resource committee member from Nyangatom:

"When the Omo overflows, it covers all the grazing land between Nyangatom and Hamer. We are trying to solve these grazing land issues, but the flooding creates new pressures every season."

These environmental shifts interact with existing climate variability and recurrent drought cycles. Even where long-term ecological impacts remain uncertain, community perceptions of environmental change can play an important role in shaping social dynamics. Concerns about declining fish stocks, changing water levels or reduced grazing availability heighten anxieties about livelihood security. These realities influence mobility patterns, fishing practices and cross-border resource use.

In the Todonyang case, these dynamics were clearly at play. The incident occurred during a period of significant hydrological fluctuations in Lake Turkana, including rising water levels that disrupted fishing communities, compounded by overfishing that has reduced fish populations. Yet no governance mechanism existed for managing the shared fishery, and no early warning system integrated environmental conditions with social indicators such as fishing competition or tensions over lake access.

The technical trap and siloed responses

Climate adaptation and water policy-making in the corridor has fallen into a 'technical trap', treating environmental stress as a challenge requiring technical solutions, rather than a governance and security issue. Adaptation programmes often proceed without systematically engaging peace structures that regulate resource access, without analysing how interventions might affect conflict dynamics and without incorporating gender analysis.

This disconnect is not for a lack of institutional architecture. Turkana county, for instance, operates under a robust policy framework, including the County Climate Change Act (2021) and a Climate Change Action Plan (2023–2027). It is also implementing innovative climate financing mechanisms, such as Financing Locally Led Climate Actions (FLoCCA). The challenges lie in the implementation.

Crucial climate data, such as drought forecasts, rangeland conditions, water resources, etc., remain siloed within the Climate Change Directorate, weakly integrated into the peace and gender programmes that need this intelligence most. Coordination gaps between directorates are a missed opportunity to design climate projects that explicitly contribute to conflict mitigation and women's empowerment. Meanwhile, many other actors implement similar adaptation projects without a harmonised monitoring framework, creating duplication and confusing communities.

In the Todonyang case, no early warning system functioned effectively because they lacked integrating indicators of environmental conditions, social factors such as fishing competition or tensions over lake access. No governance mechanism existed for managing shared fishery. The attack was not an environmental inevitability but a governance failure, the failure to treat climate stress and environmental degradation as inherently political and security relevant.

4. Why fragmentation persists: political incentives and power dynamics

The previous sections have documented how fragmentation manifests across peacebuilding, gender equality and climate adaptation in the Turkana–South Omo corridor. This section moves from describing what fragmentation looks like to analysing why it persists. To understand this, it is necessary to examine the political incentives, institutional legacies and power relations that sustain the status quo – where governance structures exist on paper but remain informal, under-resourced or un-operationalised in practice.

4.1 Incentives at the national level

In both Kenya and Ethiopia, sectoral ministries are strongly motivated to preserve their autonomy. Budgets, staff and political influence are organised around sectoral mandates. Inter-ministerial coordination requires time and resources that yield few immediate rewards for individual ministries. Climate adaptation, peacebuilding and gender equality are managed by different institutions with different reporting lines, funding streams and political constituencies. Integration is frequently discussed but rarely incentivised.

For the Kenyan and Ethiopian governments, cross-border cooperation faces additional challenges. Borderlands are often perceived as peripheral to core national interests. Engagement requires sustained political attention and resources that yield uncertain returns. Bilateral relations between Kenya and Ethiopia are generally positive, but borderland issues rarely rise to a high-level political priority unless violence escalates to the point of attracting national attention – as Todonyang briefly did. As a result, responses to climate variability, resource competition and cross-border tensions are often reactive and localised rather than coordinated across the broader ecosystem that communities share.

4.2 Incentives at the county and woreda level

The county governments in Kenya and the woreda governments in Ethiopia are where fragmentation has its most direct effects. These institutions are responsible for implementing national policies, but often lack the capacity, resources or political backing to do so effectively. More fundamentally, the incentives they face often work against integration.

In Turkana, county officials operate within a devolved system that provides significant autonomy but also creates coordination challenges with national ministries. The Peace Directorate (within the Office of the Governor) has demonstrated commitment and achieved considerable success, but its efforts are constrained by the non-operationalisation of key legislation as described in section 3.1 above. The pending PBCM Act regulations are not merely a technical delay; they reflect political dynamics

in which formalising peace structures would redistribute authority and resources. Those who benefit from the current informality, who exercise influence through personal relationships rather than formal mandates, have little incentive to support formalisation. As the Directorate of Peace noted: "Our peace structures exist in a state of permanent limbo, recognised enough to function, but not formalised enough to be effective."

In South Omo, woreda officials navigate Ethiopia's federal system, which has devolved significant responsibilities to regional states but left capacity development uneven. Coordination across woreda, zonal and regional levels adds complexity. First, with the ambiguous relationship between formal peace committees (established by federal ministry directive) and customary governance structures, when these systems offer contradictory guidance or compete for authority, implementation stalls. Second, trust deficits between communities and government are products of historical relationships, not merely technical gaps. Third, internal differences within Ethiopian border communities across clans or livelihood groups mean that communities may send mixed signals to Kenyan counterparts or lack unified positions in cross-border cooperation.

Consultations also revealed that cross-border cooperation is further complicated by perceived (or real) political dynamics on the Kenyan side. As one official from Nyangatom explained:

> *"The people on the Kenyan side have been divided for political reasons. When the government calls for community meetings, supporters of the opposition party and supporters of the county may not attend. This is another cause for weak community mobilisation. We feel like politics is one of the major obstacles."*

This underscores that the trust deficits undermining cross-border cooperation are not merely technical gaps, but products of political fragmentation that ripple across the border.

4.3 Incentives at the community level

Customary leaders within communities possess significant motivations to preserve their established authority. Informal governance systems, such as council of elders and customary mediation, have historically played an important role in managing relations between communities. However, as noted in section 3.1 above, these systems are increasingly strained. Their authority is challenged by youth who feel excluded from decision-making and increasingly operate outside customary control. They remain informal or dependent on project-based funding. Government institutions sometimes undermine rather than support customary systems, while individual organisations often set up 'their' local peace committees, which are not necessarily aligned with the social order in these contexts, and which collapse immediately once projects end.

The Todonyang case, examined in section 3 above, illustrates these dynamics. Elders on both sides reportedly sought to mediate, but their authority was insufficient to prevent or quickly resolve the violence. Young men with access to small arms operated outside customary control. Government security forces intervened without coordination with traditional structures. The suspension of peacebuilding activities following the attack reflected a breakdown of trust that informal systems alone could not repair.

4.4 The costs of fragmentation across governance sectors

Fragmentation produces real costs for communities in the corridor.

First, it produces reactive rather than preventive responses. Because no integrated early warning system exists, one that combines climate data, conflict indicators and gender analysis, tensions escalate until violence occurs, at which point security forces are deployed and peacebuilders scramble to respond. The Todonyang attack was foreseeable – competition over fishing grounds had been intensifying for months, and no governance mechanism existed to manage the shared resource. Yet no preventive action was taken.

Second, it undermines accountability. When responsibilities are fragmented across multiple institutions and governance levels, no single actor is accountable for outcomes. The Peace Directorate can point to its dialogue statistics; climate programmes can report on infrastructure built; gender initiatives can count participants trained. But no institution is responsible for the integrated outcome of sustained resilience in the face of converging pressures. Communities experience this fragmentation as government absence or indifference.

Third, it wastes resources. Multiple actors pursue parallel initiatives without coordination. NGOs implement project-based peacebuilding without sustained institutionalisation. Climate adaptation programmes build infrastructure without conflict-sensitivity analysis. Gender initiatives promote participation without addressing the structural barriers that make participation meaningful. Resources that could be pooled for greater impact are scattered across fragmented programming.

4.5 Implications for resilience in the corridor

The governance dynamics described above highlight a central challenge for resilience in the Turkana–South Omo corridor. As described throughout this paper, the region lacks integrated governance capable of addressing interconnected drivers of vulnerability – both structurally in the long term and directly when an early warning system is triggered.

Climate adaptation, natural resource governance and peacebuilding operate within separate frameworks, each with distinct mandates, funding streams and programme priorities. While these initiatives generate localised benefits, their limited coordination constrains the ability to address the systemic challenges facing pastoralist and fishing communities. Addressing this requires more than policies or programmes, but deliberate attention to the political incentives that sustain fragmentation and the strategies that can overcome them.

5. Recommendations

Strengthening resilience in the Turkana–South Omo corridor requires coordinated action across multiple governance levels. The following recommendations are proposed:

5.1 National governments of Kenya and Ethiopia

1. **Establish an institutionalised cross-border governance platform for the Omo–Turkana Basin.** The two governments, working together with IGAD, and other regional actors, should establish a shared mechanism to coordinate water, fisheries and rangeland management across the basin. This platform should enable routine information exchange, joint monitoring of lake levels and river flows, and agreed procedures for cross-border communication during crises. One possible model could be a Joint Technical Working Group supported by a small permanent secretariat, mandated to develop and operationalise cooperative agreements on shared resources.

2. **Develop and ratify a bi-national agreement on Omo–Turkana Basin governance.** Building on the outputs of the cooperative framework described above, both governments should negotiate a comprehensive agreement establishing basin-wide governance architecture with formal mandates, predictable financing and dispute-resolution mechanisms. This agreement should ensure vertical integration between national-level frameworks and the county/woreda-level governance structures proposed below.

3. **Strengthen cross-border cooperation on gender policy implementation.** Kenya and Ethiopia, together with relevant regional bodies, should undertake a joint review to better understand the gender policy implementation gaps that persist in the borderlands. Specific attention should be given to barriers preventing women's participation in cross-border peacebuilding, resource governance and climate-related decision-making. The insights from this process could inform a collaborative action plan, supported with appropriate budget allocations.

4. **Create inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms to address climate peace and gender linkages.** As regards the borderlands, both governments should mandate joint planning between ministries responsible for water, environment, pastoral development, peacebuilding and gender. Joint frameworks should require conflict sensitivity and gender analysis for all climate adaptation investments and peacebuilding programmes.

5. **Strengthen linkages between formal institutions and community-based mechanisms.** Governments should develop protocols defining relationships between formal governance structures (county/woreda administrations, security forces) and customary institutions (councils of elders, peace committees). These protocols should clarify mandates, establish communication channels and provide resources for community-level peacebuilding.

5.2 County and woreda governments

1. **Ensure active participation in the shared cross-border governance mechanism.** County and woreda governments should ensure that their representatives are actively involved in the shared mechanism proposed in recommendation 5.1(1) above, creating a vertical connection between local realities and regional/national-level decision-making.

2. **Allocate dedicated budgets for cross-border peace and gender initiatives.** County and woreda governments should include in their annual budgets specific allocations for cross-border peace committee meetings; women's participation in dialogue forums (transport, accommodation, per diem); and joint monitoring of shared resources.

3. **Mandate women's and youth's inclusion in all official cross-border delegations.** County and woreda governments should establish a requirement that all government delegations to cross-border peace and resource management meetings include minimum 30% women, with the budget to support their participation. Track compliance and report annually.

4. **Develop joint county and woreda contingency plans.** Turkana county and South Omo woredas should collaborate to develop joint contingency plans for drought, flood and cross-border resource conflict, which are integrated into early warning systems. These plans should include clear protocols for communication and coordination during emergencies.

5. **Establish joint natural resource governance committees.** County and woreda governments should create formal committees bringing together government officials, customary leaders, women's representatives and youth representatives from both sides of the border to jointly manage shared grazing areas, water points and fishing grounds. These committees should be linked to and inform the shared mechanism proposed in recommendation 5.1(1) above, reinforcing the vertical connection between governance levels.

6. **Integrate climate adaptation and peacebuilding planning.** Both governments should require that all climate adaptation projects funded through county climate change funds undergo conflict-sensitivity screening and include explicit strategies for managing potential resource competition impacts.

5.3 Regional organisations (IGAD)

1. **Expand CEWARN to incorporate climate and environmental indicators.** Enhance the CEWARN to systematically integrate climate variability data, drought trends, hydrological information and indicators of resource competition (e.g. fishing ground disputes, grazing incursions).

2. **Establish a regional knowledge-sharing platform on borderland resilience.** Create a mechanism for documenting and disseminating lessons from cross-border peace initiatives, climate adaptation programmes and community-based natural resource management across IGAD member states.

3. **Support capacity development for cross-border institutions.** Provide technical assistance and capacity-building support for emerging cross-border governance institutions, including peace committees, natural resource management bodies and early warning systems.

5.4 Civil society and local peacebuilding organisations

1. **Establish dedicated cross-border women's dialogue platforms.** Create structured, sustained platforms bringing together women leaders from Turkana and South Omo to address shared concerns, develop joint advocacy positions and participate in formal peace processes.

2. **Develop youth leadership opportunities.** Move beyond the 'sports for peace' model towards more programmes that support structural and institutional changes. These should include training youth with skills in conflict analysis, mediation, how to participate in governance and support for formal and informal institutions to create participation mechanisms for youth. The goal is to create clear routes into formal peace committees and early warning systems.

3. **Facilitate cross-border learning exchanges on climate adaptation.** Organise exchanges enabling communities to share strategies for managing drought, sustaining fisheries and protecting grazing areas, strengthening both adaptive capacity and cross-border relationships.

4. **Support community-led oversight of shared resources.** Equip community members, especially women and youth, with basic monitoring techniques to track water levels, assess grazing conditions and monitor fish stocks. Establish partnerships with research institutes and universities in Kenya and Ethiopia to ensure technical rigour and to link community-generated data with formal scientific monitoring systems. The information collected would then feed into early warning systems and resource governance discussions.

5. **Advocate for policy implementation.** Use evidence from community-level work to advocate for operationalisation of pending policies, budget allocations for gender inclusion and institutionalisation of cross-border governance mechanisms.

5.5 Development partners and donors

1. **Transition from project-based to programme-based funding.** Offer long-term funding commitments (five to ten years) for initiatives focused on transformative action for cross-border cooperation and resilience. This approach allows for sustained trust-building, institutional development and adaptive management for resilience livelihoods, conflict prevention and violence reduction.

2. **Support operationalisation of pending legislation.** Provide technical and financial assistance for finalising and implementing pending policies including Turkana's PBCM Act regulations and gender policies.

3. **Invest in research and evidence generation.** Investigate the intersection of climate, security and gender within the Omo–Turkana Basin through interdisciplinary research. The focus should be on understanding community perceptions, governance dynamics and intervention effectiveness. The research needs to be embedded in programming and policy processes so that findings can inform them directly.

4. **Support institutional capacity development.** Invest in strengthening the capacity of county and woreda governments, peace committees and customary institutions to fulfil their governance roles, rather than creating parallel project implementation structures.

5. **Advance locally led development and local ownership.** Move beyond tokenistic consultation towards meaningful community influence over programme design, decision-making and resource allocation. This means that local actors, including county and woreda governments, civil society, customary institutions, women and youth groups, have genuine decision-making power over funding priorities and programme approaches.

6. Conclusion

The Turkana–South Omo corridor illustrates the complex ways in which environmental change, livelihoods and governance intersect in pastoral borderlands. Communities in this region have long adapted to climatic variability, mobility pressures and cross-border resource competition. However, emerging pressures, including hydrological changes in the Omo–Turkana Basin, increasing climate variability and shifting livelihood patterns, are intensifying the challenges facing pastoral and fishing communities.

As this paper has argued, the primary barrier to resilience in the corridor is not the absence of policies, institutions or development programming. Both Kenya and Ethiopia possess policy frameworks addressing peacebuilding, climate adaptation and gender inclusion, while regional organisations have established mechanisms for cross-border cooperation. The challenge lies instead in the fragmentation of governance systems across sectors and borders, which limits the ability of these frameworks to respond coherently to shared environmental and livelihood pressures.

Transforming the corridor from a landscape of recurring crises to one of durable resilience requires moving beyond isolated interventions towards integrated approaches that link climate adaptation, peacebuilding, gender inclusion and cross-border natural resource governance. This demands deliberate attention to the political economy of fragmentation, the incentives that sustain it, the actors who benefit from it and the strategies that can overcome it. It requires formalising informal structures, institutionalising cross-border cooperation and ensuring that women and youth are not merely participants but become decision-makers.

By aligning efforts more effectively, governments, regional organisations, civil society and development partners can support communities navigating the increasingly interconnected challenges of climate, conflict and livelihoods in the Turkana–South Omo corridor.

Endnotes

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