

The Laikipia Peace Caravan— Learning from Pastoralist Peacebuilding in Kenya

by
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About the Author



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Much of what we know about peacebuilding—and often export to other countries—is derived from the rich body of experience and research in the international development and conflict resolution fields. However, we know less about what indigenous people are doing to bring peace in their own communities. Beyond ethnography and anthropology research, there is limited trans-disciplinary research conducted into indigenous peacebuilding.

This article shares what was learned during a participatory action research project specifically designed to explore how effective and sustainable grassroots peacebuilding emerges in the pastoralist (nomadic herder) cultures of Kenya.¹ The research project's findings are now being used by pastoralist peacebuilders to develop a cadre of *Peace Guardians* in Baringo County, Kenya, with the support of Mediators Beyond Borders Kenya Initiative (MBB-KI) and funding from the United States Institute of Peace (USIP).

LEARNING FROM THE LAIKIPIA PEACE CARAVAN

In 2006, war broke out between the Samburu and the Pokot over a proposed wildlife conservancy, where both communities had made exclusive claim over the lands. This conflict ignited past grievances about boundaries and land claims, and violence ensued between primarily these two communities, although the Tugen, Turkana and Kikuyu in the area were regularly affected and engaged as well. On September 15, 2009, the war reached its peak when warriors launched an attack and 41 people lost their lives, including 21 women and children caught in the crossfire. As revealed through the interviews, this *Kanampiu Massacre* triggered a typical immediate reaction: a massive response by the Kenyan police and military, officials flying in and out by helicopter and making pronouncements, and public demands for action. What happened next catalyzed the Laikipia Peace Caravan (LPC), which has been described as the process that gave birth to all other peace caravans.

THE POWER OF PASTORALIST NETWORKS: "WHY CAN WE NOT DO SOMETHING?"

Shortly after the massacre, several Samburu Professionals Association members met with their elected Member of Parliament for Laikipia West, Hon. Nderitu Murithi, to demand government action. Murithi's response was atypical; he responded, "It is all nice to see what government is doing, but what are we doing? We know people there. Where are the Pokot people that you know?"

He challenged the professionals to mobilize their social networks to deal with the conflict, and made his boardroom available for that purpose. *Professional* is the pastoralist word for the educated sons and daughters of their villages who now work in towns and cities. Professionals are a diverse group of pastoralist men, women, elders and youth, who are still tied to "home" in a way that gives them a unique knowledge of their communities, their traditions, the conflicts and the context. Some are reformed cattle rustlers themselves who understand the processes used to fund and implement raids and revenge attacks, such as the corrupt police stations where they can buy weapons and bullets. Although they work peacefully side by side with other ethnic groups in metropolitan areas, professionals are closely tied to their families and communities in the villages, and can often be the source of funding and incitement for inter-ethnic violence. "These days I tell you, when we move money by mobile phone, we are often part of the conflict" (Murithi). Insiders knew that, "Actually instead of providing direction, it was the professionals who are sending back the money for arms for the people, for the communities to organize themselves" (Former Official). Thus one of the first challenges in bringing the professionals together was to resolve the conflicts between themselves, and turning potential funders and inciters into peacebuilders before going to ground. To manage political influence and grandstanding, professionals shared an ethic of *everyone sits on the ground*. No matter their political position or status, all professionals were equal in the LPC.

Pastoralists in general are trained at a young age to cultivate large social networks, which they value almost as highly as their livestock. Such social networks are critical for survival in the harsh arid and semi-arid environments in which they traditionally live. The LPC utilized this unique access to social networks, within a highly fluid and adaptable process, to create the conditions for innovation and emergence for peace, and self-organize into an intentional community of practice.

CYCLES OF LEARNING AND ADAPTATION

Ongoing learning and adaptation are critical elements of embracing emergence and innovation. The professionals, drawn from a wide range of backgrounds, ethnicity and experiences with little or no training or experience in peacebuilding, in turn reached out and established a strong ground network in Laikipia. The ground network provided real time information – both rumor and truth – which informed conflict assessment and strategies, and

¹ The study was published in 2016 as part of my doctoral dissertation, and can be found in the references at the end of this article.

helped the professionals meet with and convene the communities. These ground coordinators included chiefs, area chairmen, pastors, and other community members trusted by their communities to carry a message of peace.

The LPC emerged and continuously adapted from the diverse conversations and activities in Nairobi and on the ground, providing the opportunity for strategies, messages and activities to emerge through continuous feedback loops. Participants learned from and incorporated new information gathered from weekly meetings, daily intelligence from the ground network, and nightly debriefs during travel, demonstrating the characteristics of an emergent process. Solutions were elicited from within the complex adaptive system in which the networks were engaged, in a nonlinear process that continuously adapted to both positive and negative information.

Practical wisdom and cultural sensitivity

Unlike many peacebuilding processes that focus on training in local hotels (which has produced what is known as the “peace industry” in Kenya), the peace caravan went directly to the communities involved. “The LPC went all the way to the grass roots and involved the people who are affected as well as the culprits” (Samburu Professional). Their “children” from “that far away land called Nairobi” modeled interethnic cooperation and friendship, as well as the inclusion of women and youth, and spoke messages that resonated with the practical wisdom and cultural sensitivities of the people on the ground. Elders, youth, and especially women were given the opportunity to speak passionately about the costs of violence, and their longing for peace. “Before, it was only meetings that resolve problems held by elders. Now it is different because it is the professionals holding peace talks with all stakeholders” (Samburu Elder). “The youth in the Peace Caravan were also there. They shared meals together with people of all tribes” (Samburu Chief). The LPC members included elders who could enter the sacred places to talk peace and forge commitments. From the beginning, the professionals knew that unless the solutions came from the community, peace would never be sustained. They served as “third-party neutrals” and reconciliation was forged through dialogues and meetings at all levels, at the communities’ convenience. Communication occurred in the communities’ dialects, which was noted as being very effective in building trust and understanding.

The stories from the interviews were compelling and descriptive. “Before the caravan the communities were isolated, they could not meet with other communities ... there was no mediator between the communities and youth were not involved and women were not involved” (Pokot Elder). Government forces had tried to intervene, but “How do you start engaging in peacebuilding when you have strapped a gun around your shoulder?” (Pokot Woman). The community now describes the **“peace that came from that far land called Nairobi.”** “We had never before seen our brothers and sisters from Nairobi stand on the same ground with the Samburu. They did not fear anything despite the fact that they were not armed” (Pokot Youth). “They did not fear breaking the culture of not engaging directly with other

communities” (Turkana Youth). “One perfect method was the use of role models of the different communities where the community tribes appreciated very much and they tend to listen to them very much as they are like a resource to the communities” (Kikuyu Professional). The LPC engaged the community in many meetings over a three-month period, until the five ethnic

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communities were ready to sit together. “The peace caravan was extremely more effective because they combined both traditional and the modern ways. Traditional methods couldn’t reach but the caravan did” (Kikuyu Woman).

The LPC took a neotraditional approach by using what the communities know, such as communicating in the oral traditions of storytelling. Dialogue and reconciliation are processes used in all pastoralist cultures, as well as rituals and ceremonies. Using professionals who come from the conflicting communities created peacebuilders with the access to understanding and incorporating community traditions, and the means to integrating new ideas such as gender inclusiveness.

Sustainability and resilience

The LPC process established an interethnic peace committee that includes women and youth, as well as water and pasture committees. Since its first meeting on January 4, 2010, the peace committee continues to meet every Monday, and has since expanded to smaller committees in multiple areas – with the larger group convening as needed to address issues. This shows that the emergent and self-organizing nature of the LPC facilitated the ongoing space for the Laikipia community to develop their own self-organizing capacities, establishing resilience against violent conflict and a local capacity for sustainable peace. Today, the people of Laikipia West continue to live harmoniously, share resources, intermarry, share markets, and their children attend school together.

THE MEDIATORS BEYOND BORDERS KENYA INITIATIVE AND THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The work that led to this research project began in early 2009, when the National Coordinator of the Kenya Pastoralist Network, Lantano Nabaala, contacted Mediators Beyond Borders (MBB) founder Ken Cloke for support in learning more about conflict resolution. A reformed warrior and gunrunner himself, Nabaala was seeking support for his work with young warriors engaged in traditional cattle rustling and raiding, a common source of violent conflict in Kenya’s rural arid and semi-arid lands. MBB is an international organization of mediator practitioners whose mission is to build local skills for peace and promote mediation worldwide,

with a vision of building a more peace “able” world. To support the pastoralist peacebuilding efforts, the Kenya Initiative was established in 2012.

When we started MBB-KI, we were told that the LPC was the model our pastoralist colleagues were using, because it had so successfully led to peace for the five ethnic groups living in Laikipia County, one of 47 counties in Kenya. However, as we worked with our local partners, it became clear that little was

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understood about how the process actually led to the sustainable change observed in Laikipia. Furthermore, when we applied for funding for new peace caravans to other areas experiencing ethnic violence, we kept hearing that *peace caravans* were too expensive and not effective. Over the course of time, it became obvious that something was missing in the translation from the ground to funders, because the LPC certainly worked for Laikipia. In attempting to learn more about the LPC, we discovered that there was no evaluation of the actual peacebuilding process and outcomes, and very little in writing except rare personal meeting notes and a masters thesis that described the process but did not assess effectiveness. Without any formal evaluations of the LCP, which are more typical of well-funded international projects, a peace caravan “model” developed from anecdotal evidence and what people remembered from their experiences.

Although *peace caravans* take many shapes around the world, in Kenya the particular form discussed in this article has emerged as a distinctively pastoralist process that arises from their extensive social networks. The term *peace caravan* is used to describe a broad range of mobilization activities, such as youth rallies and political events. There are some organizations using the term peace caravan in their name, such as Peace Caravan Kenya, THE Peace Caravan, and Caravan for Peace Kenya. However, little is known about them or their activities other than postings on Facebook. Since 2010 when the USAID Kenya Transitional Initiative funded a large number of peace caravans throughout the country, few peace caravans based on the LPC model have been conducted in other areas, primarily funded by the Kenyan government for short-lived emergency mobilization. No funding for any necessary follow-up has been available, nor have evaluations been obtainable, if they even exist.

Pastoralist peace caravans are based on volunteer participation, thus the lack of a formal organizational structure that can provide the administrative functions required by donors

such as USAID has been a significant barrier to receiving financial support for implementation and evaluation. The lack of staff and funding has also been a barrier to gleaning knowledge from the caravan process through conscious evaluation, and defining how the process actually contributes to building sustainable peace. To date, no subsequent peace caravan based on this model achieved the same level of success as the LPC. To fill this gap in knowledge, the participatory action research (PAR) project was designed to learn what factors led to the LPC’s effectiveness and sustainability.

Using a trans-disciplinary lens of *emergent peacebuilding design*, our team of 17 co-researchers from MBB-KI and local Kenyan partners inquired into how the LCP peacebuilding effort resulted in an *island of peace* that has been sustained by the local communities six years later. The study found “that effective and sustainable pastoralist peacebuilding emerged from expansive utilization of diverse pastoralist social networks, cycles of learning and adaptation, integration of practical wisdom and cultural sensitivities, and systemic transformation of transactional, attitudinal and structural societal domains through dialogue processes, modeling and grassroots self-organization.”

ENGAGING IN LEARNING FOR ACTION

PAR was selected as the research methodology because it is a process that fully engages co-researchers in collecting and analyzing data with the intention of using what was learned, and is intended to empower participants in their work. Co-researchers for this study included three members of the MBB-Kenya Initiative team, and 14 Kenyan pastoralists, many whom had participated in the LPC. Researchers included a male and a female interviewer from each of the five ethnic groups involved in the previous conflict in Laikipia: Samburu, Pokot, Tugen, Turkana and Kikuyu. A total of 39 semi-structured interviews were collected from elders, youth and women of each affected community, LCP professionals, and government officials who were involved. This data was coded, analyzed for themes, and the subject of in-depth reflective dialogues by the research team in 2014.

The primary research question asked *how does effective peacebuilding emerge in pastoralist cultures?* There were also secondary questions addressed regarding what factors were involved in initiating, designing and implementing neotraditional peacebuilding in remote pastoralist areas; how pastoralist peacebuilding can be designed and operationalized to be self-sustaining; and how emergent neotraditional peacebuilding mechanisms can be integrated into the Kenyan Infrastructure for Peace. Using semi-structured interviews and review of available artifacts, the research focused on gaining a clear understanding of how the LPC came to be, how it was implemented, the opportunities and challenges it faced, and the effect it had on the communities it was engaged with. Through data analysis and dialogue, the research team identified the key characteristics of the LPC that supported emergence, sustainability, and indicated effectiveness. The

team then applied these factors in developing a new concept, the Warriors to Peace Guardians Framework (WPGF). Then from this framework, a proposal was submitted to USIP for a peacebuilding initiative in an area of Baringo County that was experiencing violence, and which the Laikipia community had specifically identified as needing immediate assistance.

To address the issues of funding grassroots activities and managing complexity, an ongoing challenge for the peacebuilding field, a trans-disciplinary literature review was used to create an *emergent peacebuilding design* conceptual framework. As I noted in my dissertation:

The emergent peacebuilding design framework is intended to reframe the lens used to view and support grassroots peacebuilders working in complex and dynamic contexts. It encompasses a multi-dimensional, systemic approach to peacebuilding that evolves from grassroots participation in designing, implementing, and learning from innovative and adaptive peacebuilding processes. Such a process embraces diversity and complexity, is inclusive of traditional methods, and adapts as necessary to meet changes in context and process.

The study found that the LPC reflected these characteristics of emergent peacebuilding design, which in turn were fundamental to its effectiveness and sustainability, and the framework provided insight to how future volunteer efforts could be better supported.

Effect on peace writ large

In assessing whether the LPC was effective beyond the village level, CDA's Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP) was very helpful. RPP provides an evidence-based framework for considering whether peacebuilding efforts are effective in impacting *peace writ large*, defined as changes at the broad level of society that include stopping destructive conflict and violence and building a just and sustainable peace. RPP identifies five "criteria of effectiveness" that signal program effectiveness in affecting peace writ large; the research findings indicate these were all met by the LPC. First, the peace committee was established to "handle grievances in situations where such grievances do, genuinely, drive the conflict." Second, the peace caravan contributed to a "momentum for peace by causing participants and communities to develop their own peace initiatives" for neighboring Baringo. Third, an increased capacity to self-organize supported Laikipia communities to "resist violence and the provocations to violence." Fourth, the LPC resulted "in an increase in people's security and in their sense of security." Finally, the LPC resulted "in meaningful improvement in inter-group relations." Most importantly, the LPC met RPP's primary condition of effectiveness by fundamentally transforming the community discourse from supporting cattle rustling to considering it a criminal act, thereby eliminating the key driver of conflict and violence. Women no longer used song and dance to

incite warrior activity, mothers rejected stolen livestock, and elders cursed, rather than blessed, raids.

Effecting systemic change

We also found that Richard Ricigliano, in his book *Making Peace Last*, provides a valuable approach to considering whether a project reflects systemic peacebuilding. His SAT Model suggests that transformation of a social system's structures, attitudes, and transactional behaviors will lead to a more sustainable peace. Consistent with this, the study found that the LPC engaged the whole system, involving all genders, age groups, and influencers such as government, NGOs, and security forces. Attitudes were significantly altered regarding cattle rustling and raiding, as noted above. Interethnic cooperation became customary and expected, and what constitutes and is celebrated as manhood shifted. Transactional processes changed, as traditional conflict resolution processes became interethnic and age and gender inclusive, and socio-economic interactions such as intermarriage, sharing markets, and support between ethnic communities became the accepted way of interacting. Interethnic and inclusive water and pasture committees and peace committees were created (structural elements), which are still meeting more than six years later.

CONCLUSION

The PAR process allowed us to fully and collaboratively explore the LPC as an inspiring illustration of effective and sustainable grassroots peacebuilding, and the ways in which it resulted in enhanced local capacity for self-organization and resilience to violent conflict. The LPC was a grassroots, volunteer led process that arose from diverse social networks and continuously collected and adapted to new information. It was participatory, diverse, elicitive, culturally embedded and systemic, and was inclusive of traditional methods. It achieved many of the key criteria for impacting peace writ large and systemic change, such as increasing resistance to violence, motivating subsequent peacebuilding initiatives, and establishing increased security and meaningful improvement in intergroup relations. With a greater understanding of how the LPC so effectively emerged and built sustainable peace, we have opened new avenues to funding, and a growing cadre of pastoralist peace guardians are now receiving well-deserved support in bringing peace to their areas. ■

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