

# INFORMAL TRADE, GENDER AND CONFLICT DYNAMICS ON THE NEW KENYA-ETHIOPIA TRADE CORRIDOR

Hassan H. Kochore and Insene Bagaja



**Rift Valley Institute**  
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## MAP DESIGN

Jillian Beryl Luff

## DESIGN/LAYOUT

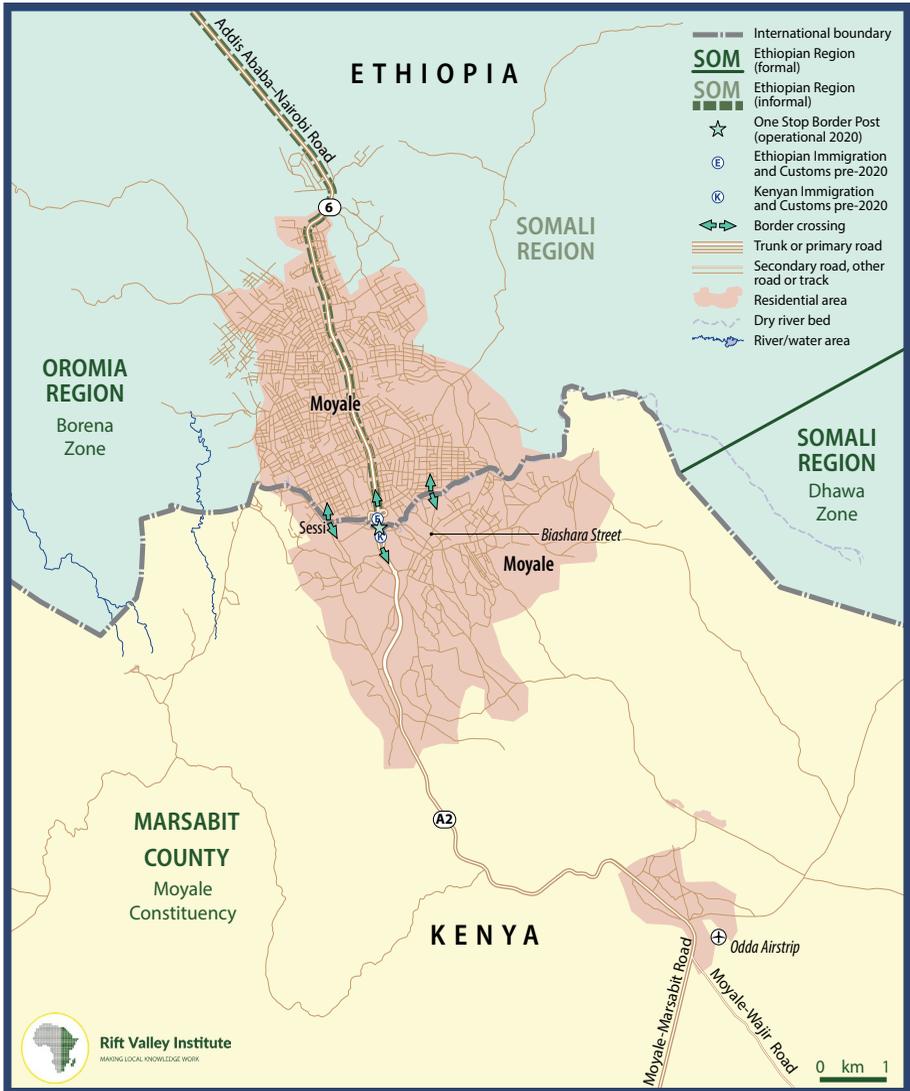
Maggie Dougherty

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# MAP



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Base map data source: OpenStreetMap

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# SUMMARY

- This report examines the effects of infrastructure development and shifting political conditions on trade and conflict at the Kenya–Ethiopia border, including on gender dynamics. In doing so, it focuses on how small-town cross-border traders in the town of Moyale, which straddles both countries, are navigating the area’s shifting economic and political landscape.
- The more recent infrastructural and political changes seen at Moyale’s border point are shaped in part by past socioeconomic developments, with the newly introduced one-stop border post (OSBP)—which houses the two countries’ immigration officials under a single roof—designed to facilitate legal movement of people as well as ensuring efficient cross-border trade.
- Nevertheless, the advantages presented by the OSBP remain—or at least are perceived as being—largely inaccessible to small-scale traders, who instead conduct their activities along alternative routes considered illegal by the authorities. The current situation, however, highlights the contradictions at play: while the county government seeks to collect revenue along these routes, the Kenya Revenue Authority regularly seizes and confiscates what it considers to be smuggled goods.
- Given that a majority of small-scale traders in Moyale today are women, the challenges faced by the town’s small-scale cross-border traders inevitably take on a gendered dimension. The ubiquity of women along the alternative routes and their role in physically providing transport for restricted commodities means they are often on the receiving end of official crackdowns.
- Kenya’s recent devolution process has also had significant impacts on Moyale’s small-scale traders, women included. Despite some positive assessments of efforts made by the county government, significant grievances exist, with some women traders complaining that county officials remain inattentive to their needs. Some of this resentment towards the county government overlaps with anger at the Kenyan national government’s attempts to increase surveillance and enforce tax collection, which has led to revenue collectors becoming ubiquitous in spaces where they were previously absent.
- One important strategy employed by the region’s women that has come to the fore over recent years is the formation of trader groups and associations, which potentially have a key role to play in helping their members navigate the impacts of conflict, particularly when it comes to facilitating cross-border trade in often perilous situations.

- Marsabit county, where Moyale is located, has a long history of violent pastoralist resource-related conflict. Partly as a result of this, the area is subject to entrenched inter-ethnic mistrust among local cross-border communities. While Moyale has experienced politically-instigated ethnic conflict in the past, the new politics of devolution has entrenched existing ethnic cleavages. Moreover, political conflicts tend to intensify insecurity along the alternative routes.
- Despite the various challenges outlined above, the OSBP and the coming of the Lamu Port–South Sudan–Ethiopia Transport Corridor (LAPSSET) project has generated a sense of hope for the future, with the fact that the town is now considered a trade corridor prompting expectations not just around related infrastructure, but the perceived indirect benefits that will accrue from having acquired this status. Such developments coincide with the narrative of a turning point towards peace having been reached as a result of lessons learnt from previous episodes of violence.

# ABBREVIATIONS

DTD	Domestic Tax Department
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
KNCC	Kenya National Chamber of Commerce
KRA	Kenya Revenue Authority
LAPSSET	Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport Corridor
LMA	Livestock Market Association
NGO	non-governmental organization
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
OSBP	One-stop border post
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front

# INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, both Kenya and Ethiopia have rolled out infrastructure projects linked to the Lamu Port–South Sudan–Ethiopia Transport Corridor (LAPSSET), which extends to their peripheral regions—specifically, the northern Kenya border and southern Ethiopia border respectively. At the same time, the introduction of the former country’s devolution process has seen the Kenyan state undergo significant structural changes—shifting from a system of centralized provincial administration to one of 47 county governments with elected governors, senators, women representatives and members of county assemblies. Against the above backdrop, this report examines the effects of infrastructure development and shifting political conditions on trade and conflict at the Kenya–Ethiopia border, including on gender dynamics. In doing so, it focuses on how small-town cross-border traders—the majority of whom are women—in the town of Moyale, which straddles both countries, are navigating the area’s shifting economic and political landscape.<sup>1</sup>

The report not only treats the border as a material resource, but takes care to recognize its immaterial manifestations. Concerning this latter aspect, the analysis looks at how the perceptions and attitudes of small-scale traders, government officials and various non-state organizations help construct the idea of a trade corridor. In this regard, we approach one-stop border posts (OSBPs)—specialized border crossing points that consolidate border control procedures and services of neighbouring countries into one location—as ‘means that exceed the infrastructures of the state. ... its constitutive relationships and material manifestation’.<sup>2</sup>

The report also discusses the state’s existing and emerging practices of control over the trading activities of small-scale traders, shedding light on the intersection of trade formalization and state-building. Small-scale traders are mostly—usually inadvertently—excluded from using the region’s OSBP, leading them to develop alternative routes along which to move their commodities.<sup>3</sup> Given the widespread involvement of women in small-scale informal cross-

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- 1 In the literature, the different spellings of Moiale (Ethiopia) and Moyale (Kenya) are often used to indicate which side of the border is being referred to. For the purposes of simplicity, however, this report uses the spelling ‘Moyale’ to refer to both but distinguishing the Kenyan and Ethiopian sides of the border town when necessary.
  - 2 Janet Roitman, ‘Modes of Governing: The Garrison-Entrepot’, in *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*, eds. A. Ong and S. Collier, Blackwell, 2005, 419.
  - 3 Although protocols aimed at integrating small-scale traders are in the making, especially by the Ethiopian government, these had not been implemented when the fieldwork took place. See: ‘Ethiopia to help small scale traders across Moyale border’. *New Business Ethiopia*. <https://newbusinessethiopia.com/trade/ethiopia-to-help-small-scale-traders-across-moyale-border/>.

border trade, the gendered aspects of trade along so-called illegal routes form a key focus.

## BACKGROUND: THE LIE OF THE BORDERLAND

In a book chapter published in 2021, researcher Günther Schlee recounts his experience of the gazetted border crossing at Moyale:

In 1991, a Boran friend from Moyale, Kenya, Abdullahi Shongolo, and I walked across the boundary into Moiale, Ethiopia. There was no state on the Ethiopian side, and we left our passports with the Kenyan border post to be collected on our way back. But there was a new government in Addis Ababa, and it was in the air that one day it would extend its power through the whole country and that the new units of administration would follow ethnic lines. We walked straight into the OLF (Oromo Liberation Front) office and found a group of men standing around a table, bent over a map of Ethiopia. They were designing Oromia.<sup>4</sup>

The regime that had just gained power did indeed ‘extend its power through the whole country’, including at the particular border described. The OLF’s co-habitation in the transitional administration alongside the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF, dominated by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front, TPLF) was short-lived, resulting in the borderland in question becoming a stronghold for resistance against the EPRDF.<sup>5</sup> This in turn led to attempts by the TPLF-led regime to tighten control over the security of this border, in part to contain OLF activity. As a consequence, securitization and militarization became the main border governance strategy.

Two decades later, shifting regional politics started to change the way the border was governed. In 2012, the Federal Government of Ethiopia and the Republic of Kenya signed a Special Status Agreement, which included an ‘economic development corridor’ along their borders.<sup>6</sup> This connects with the tarmacking of the highway linking Kenya and Ethiopia, as part of the ongoing development of LAPSET project, as part of National Vision 2030 economic blueprint contained in the Sessional Paper Number 10 of 2012.<sup>7</sup> The border

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4 Günther Schlee, ‘Unequal citizenship and one-sided communication: anthropological perspectives on collective identification in the context of large-scale land transfers in Ethiopia’, in *Lands of the Future: Anthropological Perspectives on Pastoralism, Land Deals and Tropes of Modernity in Eastern Africa*, eds. Echi Christina Gabbert et al., Berghahn Books, 2021, 62.

5 See: Cynthia Salvadori, ‘The forgotten people revisited: Human rights abuses in Marsabit and Moyale Districts’, Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2000.

6 Government of the Republic of Kenya and the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, ‘Special Status Agreement Between the Government of the Republic of Kenya and the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia on Areas of Agreed Priorities’, 21 November 2012. <https://resilience.igad.int/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/F126-SPECIAL-STATUS-AGREEMENT-21-Nov-2012.pdf>.

7 Government of Kenya. Sessional paper No. 10 of 2012 On Kenya Vision 2030. Office of the Prime Minister. Ministry of state for Planning, National Development and Vision 2030. (2012).

town of Moyale has undergone significant transformation in the context of these political and infrastructural changes, in particular the tarmacking of the Isiolo–Moyale–Hawassa road running through it. Even more prominently, the town is the site of a new OSBP. Officially launched in 2020 amid much fanfare by Kenya’s president, Uhuru Kenyatta, and Ethiopia’s prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, the OSBP has come to dominate the local cross-border landscape.<sup>8</sup>

Underlying these grand political and economic transformations, however, is a complex history of tensions and conflict among the border region’s inhabitants, which—alongside cross-border trade dynamics and the role of women—will be explored in the report.

## METHODOLOGY AND STRUCTURE

The report is based on qualitative data concerning so-called informal traders—those that use unofficial routes—in Moyale, generated through interviews and participant observation conducted in January 2024. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with government officials, individual traders, and members and officials of groups and associations, while two separate questionnaires were prepared for traders and officials. A total of 41 interviews were conducted with the following categories of respondents: 24 interviews with traders, 11 with government officials, and 6 with officials from non-state organizations.

In selecting traders, particular commodities were identified based on their predominance, specifically: *khat* (a narcotic), grain, milk, second-hand clothes and livestock. Previous studies of the Kenya–Ethiopia border have mainly centred on the livestock trade, leading to other commodities and certain demographics being overlooked (for example, women tend to operate more in retail and the petty trading of milk, grains, clothes and *khat*). To address this gap, the study focused on the small-scale trade of these commodities. In pursuing this path, the various interviews yielded a wealth of individual experiences, quotes from which are interspersed throughout the report. This empirical data is complemented by a variety of secondary sources, encompassing media and academic articles, as well as state and non-state actor reports. In particular, the report engages with the work of academics who studied the border in question

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8 The OSBP is part of the planned Mombasa–Nairobi–Addis Ababa corridor, which will be linked by the 502 km Hawassa–Moyale road project in Ethiopia, and the Isiolo–Moyale road in Kenya. The OSBP’s physical infrastructure was funded by an Africa Development Bank grant, while the United Kingdom’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, through TradeMark Africa, supported the Integrated Border Management component. See: TradeMark Africa, ‘Moyale–Moyale starts operating as a one stop border crossing point’, 8 June 2021. [www.trademarkafrica.com/press-release/moyale-moyale-starts-operating-as-a-one-stop-border-crossing-point/](http://www.trademarkafrica.com/press-release/moyale-moyale-starts-operating-as-a-one-stop-border-crossing-point/).

just prior to the onset of devolution and the LAPSSSET project.<sup>9</sup>

Two main limitations should be noted in relation to the study. Firstly, the original plan was to study both the Ethiopian and Kenyan sides of the border. Due to time constraints, however, interviews on the Ethiopian side were confined to officials at the OSBP, meaning that when it comes to traders and national/district/county government officials, the report is largely limited to Kenyan perspectives. Secondly, some traders—especially those involved in the trade and transportation of illegal goods such as fuel and beans—were hesitant to be interviewed, or declined outright.

The remainder of the report proceeds as follows. Section 1 offers an overview of how cross-border trade operates in and around Moyale, including the roles played by both the new OSBP and the two main alternative routes utilized by small-scale informal traders. Section 2 then focuses in on how women—who constitute the majority of Moyale’s small-scale traders—navigate the challenges posed by cross-border trade along the alternative routes, including the gendered effects of Kenya’s recent devolution process. Next, section 3 explores Moyale’s conflict landscape, the impacts on cross-border trade, and how traders view the area’s future in light of the actual and potential changes accompanying the OSBP and the LAPSSSET project. Finally, the conclusion briefly sums up the report’s main points, before offering some policy recommendations.

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9 Of particular relevance is Markus Hoehne and Dereje Feyissa’s characterization of ‘borders and borderlands as resources in the Horn of Africa’. Moreover, their edited collection of this name includes a case study by Fekadu Adugna on the Kenya–Ethiopia borderlands, which, in line with the volume’s focus on borders and borderlands as ‘immaterial resources’, discusses inter-ethnic political mobilization across the border, particularly in the context of electoral politics. See especially the following chapters: Dereje Feyissa and Markus Virgil Hoehne, ‘State borders and borderlands as resources: an analytical framework’ and Fekadu Adugna, ‘Making use of kin beyond the international border’, in *Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa*, eds. Dereje Feyissa and Markus Virgil Hoehne, James Currey, 2010.

# TRADE IN MOYALE: AT THE ONE-STOP BORDER POST

The anecdote from Günther Schlee in the introduction illustrates the extent to which the Ethiopian state was absent from the Moyale border point at the end of the Derg regime in 1991. During the subsequent EPRDF era, however, an immigration and customs point was established within 300 metres of the Kenyan customs point on the border between the two countries. A military checkpoint was also introduced, ensuring a high level of state border surveillance and securitization. Nevertheless, over time, the border became a key node for human smuggling in which people would enter Kenya from Ethiopia seeking onward travel to other destinations (mainly South Africa).<sup>10</sup>

The more recent infrastructural and political changes seen at Moyale's border point are shaped in part by these past developments, with the new OSBP designed to address human smuggling by facilitating legal crossings, as well as ensuring the efficient cross-border movement of goods.<sup>11</sup> The OSBP not only includes both immigration and customs components, but also houses the two countries' immigration officials under a single roof. This means travellers with passports can obtain their entry and exit stamps at adjacent counters, while trucks only have to stop once for a customs check, as the import and export teams of both countries can process them for onward travel in the same place.<sup>12</sup>

Aside from bringing together these government services, the prospect of being employed at the OSBP has attracted a variety of ethnic groups from across Kenya and Ethiopia. In the latter

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- 10 Fekadu Adugna, Priya Deshingkar and Tekalign Ayalew, 'Brokers, migrants and the state: Berri Kefach "door openers" in Ethiopian clandestine migration to South Africa', Migrating Out of Poverty Research Programme Consortium, University of Sussex, 2019, 24. [https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/articles/online\\_resource/Brokers\\_Migrants\\_and\\_the\\_State\\_Berri\\_Kefach\\_Door\\_Openers\\_in\\_Ethiopian\\_Clandestine\\_Migration\\_to\\_South\\_Africa/26440894?file=48089050](https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/articles/online_resource/Brokers_Migrants_and_the_State_Berri_Kefach_Door_Openers_in_Ethiopian_Clandestine_Migration_to_South_Africa/26440894?file=48089050); M. L. McAuliffe and F. Laczko, eds., Migrant Smuggling Data and Research: A Global Review of the Emerging Evidence Base, Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 59–61. [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/smuggling\\_report.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/smuggling_report.pdf).
  - 11 The bulk of exports from Kenya into Ethiopia include pharmaceutical products, plastics, soap, lubricants, baking powder and yeast, fertilizers and liquified petroleum gas, while goods moving in the other direction mainly consist of agricultural produce, such as wheat, red kidney beans, sorghum, sesame, lentils, wheat and spices.
  - 12 For more on the functions of the OSBP, see: Paul Nugent and Isabella Soi. 'One-stop border posts in East Africa: State encounters of the fourth kind', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 14/3 (2020).

case, Oromo, Amhara, Tigrayans and even Nuer from Gambella have come to work as officials.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the ethnic composition of the Kenyan traders and officials using or working at the OSBP reflects the region's wider population—the majority have a pastoralist background, alongside some from farming communities. The former group include Borana, Burji, Gabra, Somali (Gurre and Ajuran) and Sakuye, and the latter the Burji and Konso. There is a significant number of down-country groups from Kenya working as officials of the OSBP as well.

The benefits of the OSBP are loudly proclaimed in various ways, from posters put up in the premises (in both Amharic and English) to banners on the highway. Nevertheless, these advantages remain inaccessible to small-scale traders, who do not use big trucks to move their goods. The following sub-section presents the perspectives of these traders, whose activities are officially considered illegal, or at best informal, due to their preferred use of alternative, non-OSBP, routes.



New highway signage welcoming visitors to Moyale, Ethiopia, January 2024 © HH Kochure



New highway signage welcoming visitors to Moyale, Kenya, January 2024 © HH Kochure

## PERSPECTIVES ON THE OSBP AND INFORMAL TRADE ROUTES

The majority of small-scale informal traders interviewed in Moyale—most of whom, as previously mentioned, are women—did not find the OSBP useful in facilitating their cross-border trade, with some even arguing that such trade was easier before its introduction. The latter complainants point to the fact that minimal if any paperwork used to be required to move goods across the border on a small scale: ‘There was less restriction on trade and the movement of goods was smooth’.<sup>14</sup> Similar sentiments can be found in media reports: ‘The residents say when the movement of people across the border was smooth, life was easier because they would

13 According to a Nuer officer, Kenyans often joked with him by asking, ‘What is a Sudanese doing in an Ethiopian office? Sudanese, go back to Sudan!’ This diversity on the Ethiopian side is attributed to regime change in the post-TPLF era. Previously, formal border officials were allegedly dominated by one ethnic group.

14 Interview with transporter, Moyale, January 2024.

buy products from Ethiopia'.<sup>15</sup> The establishment of the OSBP, however, brought a push for trade formalization, requiring all traders to present documents if they wished to do business across the border:

Before the road leading to the OSBP was tarmacked, all traders could use the main road. After the tarmac and the establishment of a one-stop border post, there was a restriction on movement. The Kenyan government had no issues with movement but the Ethiopian government got so many restrictions, especially on private motorbikes and vehicles with Kenyan number plates.<sup>16</sup>

These restrictions have led to the exclusion of small-scale traders, prompting them to adopt alternative routes they consider more convenient. Although these alternative routes predate the OSBP, their usage has reportedly increased significantly since its introduction. Many of the small-scale traders interviewed engaged in speculation as to the reasons they have not been properly integrated into the OSBP system. Most believe there is inadequate state capacity to handle the anticipated influx of small-scale cross-border traders should the border be opened to them. In addition, some traders suggest the Ethiopian government is concerned about the possibility of heightened insecurity, as opening the border to small-scale trade would greatly increase the difficulty of closely monitoring them due to their numerous numbers.<sup>17</sup> The latter point in particular underlines the continued salience of Ethiopia's securitization strategy, which appears to be an important factor in the underutilization of the OSBP, despite the purported rationale of promoting trade and facilitating the movement of people.

More generally, the underutilization of the OSBP is often attributed at least in part to the lack of local cross-border community involvement/consultation during its construction, with many local cross-border traders unaware of the benefits offered by the OSBP:

At the time of the construction of OSBP in Moyale, the local cross-border traders were not consulted. Even though this was an oversight, there is need to orient the traders on how OSBP can facilitate their trade, and introduce standard operating procedures that users of OSBP can familiarize themselves with.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, official narratives—at least on the Kenyan side—paint a different picture. The government offices (both at the county and national level) responsible for tax and revenue collection contend that the OSBP is underused primarily due to traders attempting to evade tax and smuggle illegal goods into the country. For example, the head of Moyale's Sub-County

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15 Gitonga Marete and Jacob Walter, 'Why Moyale post is a trade barrier', *Business Daily*, 26 September 2022. [www.businessdailyafrica.com/bd/economy/why-moyale-post-is-trade-barrier-3962712](http://www.businessdailyafrica.com/bd/economy/why-moyale-post-is-trade-barrier-3962712).

16 Interview with transporter, Moyale, January 2024.

17 Interview with vegetable trader, Moyale, January 2024.

18 Interview with COMESA information desk officer, Kenya National Chamber of Commerce, Moyale, January 2024.

Revenue Office asserts that traders avoid the OSBP because that ‘...makes it easy for traders to evade tax. What they pay at the alternative (informal) routes is different’.<sup>19</sup> A Kenya Revenue Authority (KRA) supervisor backs this up, pointing to ‘...traders trying to evade tax, traders being afraid to face KRA and government in general’.<sup>20</sup> This implies that while traders do incur costs along the informal routes—including county government fees—there are less stringent rules about the status of the commodities, for example second hand clothes which are illegal in Ethiopia and cannot pass through the OSBP or even khat which has a legal status but is not regulated through the official rules at the OSBP, are still subject to fees along the alternative routes.

For this and other reasons that the report discusses later, most small-scale traders in Moyale prefer using the ‘Sessi’ and ‘Biashara’ unofficial cross-border routes. The first of these routes is a dirt road that connects Sessi in Kenya to the Ethiopian side of the border. The route is manned by Kenya police on the Kenyan side and Oromia regional police on the Ethiopian side. Kenyan residents of Moyale often refer to the security forces as ‘the Ethiopian militia’—a loaded term rooted in the problematic relationship locals have had with Ethiopian forces due to the latter’s periodic pursuit of rebels into Kenyan territory. Since 2014, the County Government of Marsabit in Kenya has also deployed revenue officers along the route.

The second route is along Biashara street, which, despite being poorly maintained and full of potholes, is one of the busiest streets in Kenya’s Moyale market. It is lined with shops (and wholesalers), as well as traders selling their wares on the street. At the northern end of the street, there are many warehouses—as the locals call them—for storing goods. In recent years, these alternative routes have attracted the attention of the national media, which have repeatedly portrayed them as a hotbed for illicit trade.<sup>21</sup> One representative article points out, ‘Existing porous borders, most within less than 5km of the OSBP, are the preferred routes for moving goods, as high taxation continues to fuel illicit trade’.<sup>22</sup> Those operating in the area are prone to speculation on what the police and the militia might do to an outsider/newcomer suspected of ‘surveying their territory’.<sup>23</sup>

Despite cross-border trade along the two routes officially being illegal, small-scale traders regard them as preferable to the OSBP. This is down to two main reasons, the first of which is the perceived high cost of taxation at the OSBP: ‘Especially for those who have few goods, they suffer a great loss because they end up paying more

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19 Interview with Moyale sub-county revenue officer-in-charge, Moyale, January 2024.

20 Interview with Eric Kitilik, KRA station supervisor, Moyale, January 2024.

21 See for example: Marete and Walter, ‘Why Moyale’; Martin Mwita, ‘Moyale: Where illicit trade is thriving along porous borders’, *The Star*, 20 September 2021. [www.the-star.co.ke/news/big-read/2021-09-20-moyale-where-illicit-trade-is-thriving-along-porous-borders/](http://www.the-star.co.ke/news/big-read/2021-09-20-moyale-where-illicit-trade-is-thriving-along-porous-borders/).

22 Mwita, ‘Moyale: Where’.

23 As the authors of this report discovered during a trip along this route when they were stopped and asked to identify themselves.

than what they paid for the goods. This makes the informal route better than OSBP.<sup>24</sup> This has connection to general perception about high taxation, and lack of knowledge on taxation of small-scale retail goods, which to some extent was also confirmed by KRA staff we interviewed.<sup>25</sup>

The second is the assumption that moving goods through the OSBP will require cumbersome paperwork, although most of the interviewed traders lack any direct experience of this. Given this perceived obstacle, traders appreciate the lack of documentation required in their interactions with the police and county revenue officers along the Sessi and Biashara routes.

According to the interviewed traders, operating along the two alternative routes mainly relies on establishing a relationship of trust with the officers controlling them. For example, on the Kenyan side, a trader without the means to pay the necessary fees to revenue officers—who are generally from the area and thus known personally to the traders—or bribes to police officers may negotiate to gain access regardless, under the promise they will settle their arrears the next time they pass through.<sup>26</sup> The granting of trust also works the other way round—for example, traders may advance khat to the officers on credit.<sup>27</sup>

These and other forms of interaction between the traders and government officials reflect what has been characterized as an ‘ethics of illegality’.<sup>28</sup> This refers to a situation whereby otherwise illicit activities are rendered, to some degree, licit due to informally agreed norms, such as—in the above case—the idea of fair amounts for bribes or the acceptance of deferred payment for such fees. Here, an important lesson to be drawn from the activities along these informal routes is that informality is often relatively procedural, reliable and predictable for traders—a conclusion backed up by other studies.<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, several traders challenged the perceived ‘reliability and security’ of these routes, having had their entire stock confiscated by the Ethiopian or Kenyan authorities.<sup>30</sup> The illegal goods targeted by the authorities include sugar and petroleum, beans, second-hand clothes (popularly referred to as *mitumba* in Kenya and *salbaje* in Ethiopia), and cannabis. In

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24 Interview with Abdi Cheja, second-hand clothes trader, Moyale, January 2024.

25 Interview with head of domestic tax department, Moyale, January 2024.

26 Interview, grains trader, Moyale, January 2024.

27 Interview with khat trader, Moyale, January 2024.

28 Janet Roitman, *Fiscal Disobedience: An Anthropology of Economic Regulation in Central Africa*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

29 Mustafe M. Abdi, ‘Regularly Irregular: Varieties of informal trading in the Ethiopia-Somaliland borderlands’, Rift Valley Institute, 2021. [www.xcept-research.org/publication/regularly-irregular-varieties-of-informal-trading-in-the-ethiopia-somaliland-borderlands/](http://www.xcept-research.org/publication/regularly-irregular-varieties-of-informal-trading-in-the-ethiopia-somaliland-borderlands/).

30 Interview with second-hand clothes trader, Moyale, January 2024.

this respect, one local asserts, ‘it is better to be caught with *bhang* (cannabis) instead of beans’.<sup>31</sup> According to an Ethiopian customs official, red kidney beans constitute about 90 per cent of the country’s official exports to Kenya.<sup>32</sup> Such beans are also, however, smuggled out through the illegal routes and taken to Kenyan customs, where they are passed off as local Kenyan beans and transported onwards. Given this illicit cross-border trade deprives the Ethiopian government of tax revenue, the country’s authorities treat the smuggling of beans with great seriousness.

The main means of transport along the alternative routes are *boda-boda* (motorcycle taxis) and *bajaji* (motorized rickshaws), which are restricted from crossing at the OSBP. As one transporter explains:

The only movement of goods allowed at the OSBP is for large-scale trade involving trucks; either transit or import/export. ... vehicles and motorbikes with Ethiopian number plates are allowed to pass through the OSBP from either side [both Kenya and Ethiopia]. Kenyan vehicles and motorbikes are not allowed to go past Kenyan customs or they would risk confiscation.<sup>33</sup>



Bajaji on the Ethiopian side of the border: they are not allowed into the OSBP, January 2024 © HH Kochure



Ethiopian bajaji moving on the informal route of Biashara street on the Kenyan side, January 2024 © HH Kochure

The Ethiopian authorities have confiscated dozens of *boda-boda* and *bajaji* with Kenyan registration plates, while Kenyan KRA officials also have grievances about *boda-boda*:

Transport is a problematic area for the KRA as well. Take the example of *boda-boda*, most of them come from Nairobi and other areas. Most of these are sold in Ethiopia through illegal routes and sold in cash. So it is impossible to track the transactions. Most people have relatives across so they register in their relative’s names. There’s free movement

31 Interview, former trader, now Programme Assistant, USAID/Chemonics, January 2024.

32 Interview with team coordinator for Export Ethiopia, January 2024.

33 Interview with transporter, Moyale, January 2024.

of boda-boda between Kenya and Ethiopia through other routes [apart from the official border crossing]. Even in Ethiopia, boda-boda are tolerated as opposed to cars.<sup>34</sup>

The Ethiopian government's confiscation of vehicles and motorcycles greatly impacts the ability of small-scale traders to move goods across the border, often driving up the costs of using boda-boda, as their drivers charge more due to the risks involved:

In Moyale, the authorities confiscate motorbikes with Kenyan number plates on random days. They sometimes confiscate motorbikes, especially from the Ethiopia side and this makes it difficult for the customers to get their goods.<sup>35</sup>

The authorities on the Kenyan side of the border appear unwilling or unable to address this situation. As a leader of a women's association angrily observes:

The county government is not helping because several motorbikes and cars were confiscated by the Ethiopian government. These have stayed in Ethiopia for more than five years since they were confiscated. Until today, the leaders of this area have not been able to do anything about those assets.

More recently, Kenyan devolution (explored in the following section) has led to county revenue officers and KRA officials establishing a new layer of formality along the alternative routes. As a KRA station supervisor for Moyale confirms: 'There are KRA officers stationed at the alternative routes to ensure that illegal items do not enter Kenya and intercept them when spotted'.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, a county official notes that the county office generates a 'significant amount of its revenue from the illegal routes', a statement that highlights the contradictions at play concerning the legality of cross-border trade using the alternative routes—on one hand, the county collects revenue along these routes, while on the other hand the KRA regularly confiscates goods seized on what it considers to be illegal routes.<sup>37</sup>

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34 Interview with head of domestic tax department, Moyale, January 2024.

35 Interview with, second-hand clothes seller, Moyale, January 2024.

36 Interview with, KRA station supervisor, Moyale, January 2024.

37 Interview with Moyale sub-county revenue in-charge, Moyale, January 2024.

# WOMEN SMALL-SCALE TRADERS AND THE IMPACTS OF KENYAN DEVOLUTION

Studies of women's role in the region's informal trade often link their increased involvement to the decline of pastoralism. In northern Kenya, this dates back to the 1970s, following the secessionist insurgency that broke out in the then Northern Frontier District at independence (the so-called Shifta War of 1964–1969). It was during this time, for example, that Somali and Boran women started selling khat.<sup>38</sup> The effects of the war, followed by recurrent droughts, led to significant livestock loss, which in turn catalyzed the process of 'sedentarization and market integration' seen in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>39</sup>

More recently, studies have regarded small-scale trade as offering a means for women to diversify their livelihood strategies beyond the pastoral economy. Alongside this, however, several studies examining the commodification of traditionally women-controlled livestock products, such as camel milk, within the context of conflict, displacement and urbanization, have pointed to women's agency and innovation in managing such products.<sup>40</sup>

As previously stated, a majority of small-scale traders in Moyale today are women, which means that the challenges faced by the town's small-scale cross-border traders inevitably take on a gendered dimension. Alongside their involvement in small-scale trading, women are ubiquitous along the Sessi and Biashara routes, acting as transporters of goods by carrying—among other things—jerrycans loaded with fuel or sacks of grain on their backs (culturally, most men in this region do not carry luggage on their backs, with the exception particularly of Konso men who work as loaders and porters in the town). This ubiquity and role in physically providing transport for restricted commodities such as fuel and beans means women tend to be subject to

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38 Anders Hjort, 'Trading miraa: From school-leaver to shop-owner in Kenya', *Ethnos* 39/1–4 (1974); Carrier, Neil C. M., *Kenyan Khat: The Social Life of a Stimulant*, Leiden: Brill, 2007.

39 Kevin Smith, 'Sedentarization and market integration: New opportunities for Rendille and Ariaal women of northern Kenya', *Human Organization* 57/4 (1998).

40 Anderson, David M. et al., 'Camel herders, middlewomen, and urban milk bars: the commodification of camel milk in Kenya', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 6/3 (2012); Solveig Buhl and Katherine Homewood, 'Milk Selling Among Fulani Women in Northern Burkina Faso', in *Rethinking Pastoralism in Africa: Gender, Culture, and the Myth of the Patriarchal Pastoralist*, ed. Dorothy L. Hodgson, 2000, Oxford: James Currey; Nori, M. et al., 'Milking Drylands: The Marketing of Camel Milk in North-East Somalia', *Nomadic Peoples* 10/1 (2006).

greater attention by the authorities. As such, it is women who are often on the receiving end of official crackdowns aimed at restricting the illicit movement of these goods.

Women traders have also been accused of interrupting the trade in sheep and goats transported along the alternative routes by buying the animals before they reach the livestock market in town. As a sub-county livestock officer complains:

The traders, mainly women who interrupt livestock movement to livestock market along the roads are discouraged because the government revenues are being interrupted. It is also not a good picture for donors because they are not using the provided market facilities. The hygiene of the town is also messed with.<sup>41</sup>



Woman transporting goods along Biashara street, January 2024 ©  
HH Kochure

## KENYAN DEVOLUTION

Kenya's recent devolution process has also had significant impacts on Moyale's small-scale traders, women included. In terms of devolution's purported aim of bringing political representation and national resources to the local level, the small-scale traders interviewed expressed appreciation of Marsabit county government in several respects. One example is the organizing of trade fairs, which give traders the opportunity to exhibit their products and services to the general public, as well as providing a space for them to exchange ideas with fellow traders. Marsabit county held its first-ever trade fair in 2014—something most traders in

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41 Interview with Molu Godana, Moyale sub-county livestock officer, Moyale, January 2024. Attempts to interview these traders and transporters were unsuccessful due to the sensitive nature of such trade from a security viewpoint.

the area had never experienced prior to devolution.

The county government has also made direct contributions to trade, such as reducing some daily fees and taxes:

Before devolution shoe sellers paid 50 shillings daily, after the new government came in it was changed to 20 shillings daily, and for the shoes and clothes traders they used to pay 600 shillings but now it has been reduced to 450 shillings, so this is a great achievement.<sup>42</sup>

Another area the county government has been involved in is the improvement of infrastructure around markets. This includes the construction of a perimeter wall around ‘Soko<sup>43</sup> Baale’, which traders say has ‘reduced incidences of theft and the general security’.<sup>44</sup>

In addition, county government support to traders can take more indirect forms, such as helping women with school fees for their children in the form of scholarships. This allows women to maintain their capital in their business, rather than being forced to use such resources to pay school fees.<sup>45</sup>

Despite these positive assessments, significant grievances against the county government remain. For example, women traders feel they are unable to gain the recognition or attention of top county officials, particularly the governor. Despite participating in the most recent trade fair, representatives of the Moyale Camel Milk Dairy Cooperative Society complained the county governor did not stop to listen to their views beyond tasting their milk and saying it was good.<sup>46</sup> Individual traders expressed similar sentiments, asserting that county government officials are inattentive to the needs of women traders: ‘The politicians only know how to give hand-outs to get the voters but are not ready to listen to their [voters’] needs after being elected to office’.<sup>47</sup>

Often, the grievances expressed by small-scale traders extend to areas in which the county government has been noted to have made improvements, particularly taxes. In this respect, a particular source of contention is the county government’s new involvement along the alternative routes, where they collect fees together with security officials:

Pre-devolution is better because then there was enough circulation or flow of money in the market and one can’t compare it with the current one where the government is now taxing everything.<sup>48</sup>

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42 Interview with shoes/clothes trader, Moyale, January 2024.

43 Soko means market in Kiswahili.

44 Interview, shoes/clothes trader, Moyale, January 2024.

45 Interview with chairperson of Bilka Women Traders Association, January 2024.

46 Interview with chairperson of Moyale Camel Milk Dairy Cooperative, Moyale, January 2024.

47 Interview with grains trader, Moyale, January 2024.

48 Interview with livestock trader, Moyale, January 2024.



Ditch dug by KDF at Sessi to deter illegal movement, the other side is Moyale, Ethiopia, January 2024

© HH Kochure

Here, some of the resentment towards the county government overlaps with anger at the Kenyan national government's (at time aggressive) attempts to increase surveillance and enforce tax collection. This has led to revenue collectors becoming ubiquitous in spaces where they were previously absent. A KRA official describes the situation thus:

The government is working on structures and measures in collecting more taxes from traders. Measures for example that ensure that traders declare their sales. There is an enforcement unit introduced in October 2023 called the RSA—Revenue Service Assistants. RSAs have uniforms for easier identification to deter imposters.<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, the national outcry over taxes in Kenya has been keenly felt in the Mayole context:

The government wants us to use the one-stop border post, do the online tax payment instead of using the informal routes, they are not in a position to do the online thing because they don't have sufficient funds or capital. They are being taxed, the Ethiopian government does not want to open the border post and the Kenyan government also wants them to pay the taxes, so this is very difficult.<sup>50</sup>

The antipathy expressed by traders has also been noted by KRA officials themselves, with the head of the Domestic Tax Department (DTD) noting:

49 Interview with head of domestic tax department, Moyale, January 2024.

50 Interview with livestock trader/butcher, Moyale, January 2024.

Because the Customs Department was already here, it was easier to establish a DTD here as opposed for example to Marsabit (town). But sometimes more presence of KRA leads to resentment among traders and public who have not been paying taxes.<sup>51</sup>

Overall, most small-scale traders believe that trade volumes have fallen significantly compared to pre-devolution days. This is expressed in the form of nostalgia for the perceived better money circulation seen in times past. While such changes may to an extent be attributed to a fluctuating national economy, there are local explanations as well. As described above, traders are generally unhappy with how the national government has been handling tax matters. Moreover, traders report having negative experiences with the authorities, with one second-hand clothes seller claiming that despite having the required licences to operate their businesses, traders are faced with KRA officers finding flimsy excuses—such as a lack of ‘unnecessary items like fire extinguishers’—to extort money from them.<sup>52</sup> Regardless of such experiences, as well as the disruptions caused by violent conflict (explored in the following section), many traders remain optimistic of the opportunities that the new LAPSSSET trade corridor will offer.

## WOMEN'S GROUPS AND ASSOCIATIONS

One important strategy employed by the region's women that has come to the fore over recent years is the formation of trader groups and associations. These fall into two broad categories: independent woman-led groups and associations connected to the national government.

In terms of the former category, a prominent example is the Moyale Camel Milk Dairy Cooperative. Formed in 2015, it is one of the biggest dairy marketers in Moyale sub-county, and consists of five smaller groups, all of which are headed by a female chairperson. In total, it has 140 female and 4 male members (although the overall chairperson of the cooperative is one of the four men). Ethnically, the group is made up of Gabra, Borana, Garre, Sakuye and Corner Tribe, which are five of the main ethnic groups in Moyale. The milk is sourced locally from within Moyale sub-county. Through capitalizing on their common interests in trade and drawing on the group's multi-ethnic membership, the women are able to achieve wider market appeal, as well as reduce the ethnic targeting of members' businesses during times of conflict.

Another relevant example when it comes to cross-border trade is a local khat group composed of 60 women from both sides of the border in Moyale. The group operates by buying khat from its members in the Ethiopian side of town, before proceeding to sell the commodity on the Kenyan side. According to the group's members, membership not only provides financial benefits, but offers emotional and practical support amid a challenging social environment (for example, in addressing the stigma of the khat trade being associated with divorced women).

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51 Interview with head of domestic tax department, Moyale, January 2024.

52 Interview with second-hand clothes trader, Moyale, January 2024.

Turning to the second category, associations connected to government seek to bring together capital, as well as engage state and non-state actors for various reasons. Examples present in Moyale include the Small-scale Informal Cross-border Traders Association, the Informal Women Cross-border Traders Association and the Livestock Market Association (LMA). These associations support their members directly while also seeking access to external support on their behalf. This support may take the form of direct funding or, for example, capacity-building by NGOs focused on cross-border peacebuilding initiatives. The Moyale Camel Milk Dairy Cooperative, for instance, have received equipment—a freezer and a milk dispenser—as wells as ‘women in business’ training from various NGOs for some of its members. The formation of such groups has been on the rise over the past eight years.

The Kenyan government also actively encourages the formation of groups by women involved in trade. For example, both the director and the information desk officer at the Kenya National Chamber of Commerce (KNCC) are engaged in helping women’s groups secure membership certificates, which they can then use to seek support from various organizations (including gaining licences for operating businesses). The KNCC also helps traders access and fill out ‘essential trade documents’, as well as document instances of harassment.<sup>53</sup>

Sometimes, relevant associations negotiate with government on issues such as revenue sharing. Here, the LMA’s discussions with the Sub-County Livestock Office provide an illustrative example, with one livestock trader observing that ‘For every KES 100 collected per goat at the market, KES 30 should go to LMA. For a camel and a cow, the amount is supposed to be KES 40 but the negotiation is still on with the government to finalize the figures’.<sup>54</sup>

The generally enthusiastic response to associations among women traders is also reflected in stories about the overseas opportunities presented to members, including trips made for benchmarking purposes to other African countries: ‘As the chair of Bilka Women Traders, I got the chance to interact with other traders from COMESA [Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa] member countries such as Zambia and Zimbabwe. Travelling courtesy of COMESA’.<sup>55</sup> The KNCC also takes credit for organizing such trips through the Cross-Border Association for Eastern and Southern Africa.<sup>56</sup>

A further advantage of groups and associations is that they can help traders devise ad hoc measures to keep their business afloat during times of violent conflict. As one interviewee—a butcher who buys cows from Bulladhi livestock market on the Ethiopian side of town before selling the meat on the Kenyan side—recounts:

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53 Interview with KNCC/COMESA information desk officer, Moyale, January 2024.

54 Interview with livestock trader, Moyale, January 2024.

55 Interview with chairperson of Bilka Women Traders Association, Moyale, January 2024.

56 Interview with KNCC/COMESA information desk officer, Moyale, January 2024.

But when there is conflict in Ethiopia it becomes difficult for us to get cows from Ethiopia because what happens on either side affects every one. In such times, access to the Bulladhi livestock market is difficult. Instead of closing butcheries, traders come together into maybe groups of four to get a camel and share the meat. It is difficult to slaughter goats because our customers [hotels] prefer beef because of the steak.<sup>57</sup>

Although new women's associations appear to have gained political and economic relevance in recent years, older women's rights organizations—such as *Maendeleo ya Wanawake*, previously one of the most prominent civil society organizations in Kenya—have increasingly lost relevance. Instead, both the county and national government are giving priority to working with groups and associations involved in trade, especially in a post-conflict context. When interviewed, the chair of *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* in Moyale expressed anger, particularly towards the county government, that the organization is not involved in the development concerns of Moyale's women. Despite occasionally being engaged by the national government, for example through the office of the deputy county commissioner, those representing the organization 'do not feel recognized or appreciated'.<sup>58</sup>

As touched on above, women's groups and associations potentially have a key role to play in helping their members navigate the impacts of conflict, particularly when it comes to facilitating cross-border trade in often perilous situations. It is to the issue of conflict and its implications for small-scale cross-border trade that the report now turns.

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57 Interview with Butcher, Moyale, January 2024.

58 Interview with chairperson of *Maendeleo ya Wanawake*, Moyale, January 2024.

# DEALING WITH CONFLICT AND BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

Marsabit county, where Moyale is located, has a long history of violent pastoralist resource-related conflict. Disputes flare around land, pasture and water, which has led to fierce contestation over administrative and electoral boundaries. In the recent past, these conflicts have been further inflamed by the national and local election context (every five years in Kenya), especially in areas where rival communities such as the Gabra and Boran share resource borders.<sup>59</sup> In Moyale sub-county, the Wajir–Moyale border has been a key site of resource conflicts, with the Boran of Moyale and Somali clans clashing periodically. Moreover, the coming of the LAPSET project has intensified competition for land along the highway in places like ‘Bosnia’<sup>60</sup> close to Moyale, an area heavily affected by the post-election violence of 2013, which saw many people killed or displaced, and property destroyed. During elections, these areas are often mapped as hotspots by the both the national and county government administration, as well as local NGOs.

In part due to these longstanding issues, the area is subject to entrenched inter-ethnic mistrust among local cross-border communities. As a result, relatively minor disputes between youth of different ethnicities can quickly escalate into full-blown conflict:

Conflicts occur over some trivial issues like theft of motorbikes, and arguments between young people from different tribes among others. All of these are very minor, but these are what blow up and cause conflict among the communities. This happens because locals are already living in fear of each other, there is no trust.<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, while Moyale has experienced politically-instigated ethnic conflict in the past, the new politics of devolution has entrenched existing ethnic cleavages, creating new fault-lines

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59 For instance, in Moyale and Saku constituencies, at Turbi–Funan Qumbi boundary and Shurr respectively.

60 This is a route and (later settlement) that developed off the Marsabit–Moyale highway through the bush in the early 1990s as a consequence of livestock traders avoiding the highway because of the numerous checkpoints and the cost involved (in terms of bribes demanded by the police). Conflicts occurred along the route as particular ethnic groups took control and denied others access hence equating the clearing of some of the groups off the route as ‘Bosnian standard of ethnic cleansing’. See Schlee, Günther. “Brothers of the Boran once again: on the fading popularity of certain Somali identities in northern Kenya.” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 1.3 (2007): 417–435.

61 Interview with livestock trader, Moyale, January 2024.

that have the potential to precipitate violent conflict.<sup>62</sup> Such conflict inevitably impacts cross-border trade and the livelihoods—particularly among women—reliant on it. In particular, decentralization has brought with it an increased number of elected posts, leading to a highly polarized political climate in which members of different ethnicities compete against each other to become county assembly members, senators, women representatives or governor. As the chairman of Moyale Camel Milk Cooperative observes, ‘In Moyale, there is over-politicization of everything and politicians use young people to advance their agenda’.<sup>63</sup> Devolution-related conflicts (during and even long after elections) have also increased the militarization of Moyale.

The fact that additional security forces have been drawn to the area due to the conflicts accompanying the political process has provoked mixed feelings among Moyale’s residents. For example, although a local butcher asserts that, ‘Everyone is afraid of the government especially KDF [Kenya Defence Forces]’, they also acknowledge the role played by the Border Patrol Unit in keeping the peace: ‘they settled in Heilu to keep peace around the place since Heilu was a hotspot. We have not had any conflict since’.<sup>64</sup> State involvement in Moyale’s security is also visible in the institutionalization of the various ad hoc peace committees and forums that have been proliferated in response to local conflicts, including the Conflict Prevention Mitigation and Response Committee, which includes representatives from both sides of the border in Moyale.

Inevitably, conflicts in the region can cause severe disruption to everyday trading activities. As one trader relates:

The conflict in 2013 affected me greatly because it was during that conflict, I lost all my assets. My house was burnt down, livestock was stolen, and business suffered a great loss because all the meat was rotten, I had to throw them away. I was displaced and went to Ethiopia and then came back to Sessi before rebuilding in Manyatta, Moyale.<sup>65</sup>

Political conflicts, whether ethnic or also involving different regional government forces, tend to intensify insecurity along the alternative routes for two main reasons. Firstly, the distribution of ethnic settlements in Moyale means that the Boran dominate the Sessi area, while Somali clans are more present in the area adjacent to Biashara street. Secondly, the two routes fall under different regional administrations: Oromia (Sessi) and Somali (Biashara). As such, it can be unsafe for Boran traders to operate along the Biashara route and Somali traders along the Sessi route, particularly during times of heightened insecurity. While some women traders have managed to navigate such situations by paying brokers to help with the safe passage of their goods, others have been unable to surmount the obstacles posed by local conflict and so been forced to abandon their businesses.

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62 Schlee, Günther and Abdullahi A. Shongolo, *Pastoralism and Politics in Northern Kenya and Southern Ethiopia*, Boydell and Brewer, 2012.

63 Interview with chairperson of Moyale Camel Milk Dairy Cooperative, Moyale, January 2024.

64 Interview with butcher, Moyale, January 2024.

65 Interview with butcher, Moyale, January 2024.

## THE OSBP AND THE FUTURE OF CROSS-BORDER TRADE AND CONFLICT IN MOYALE

Against the above backdrop, and despite a perception that it is inaccessible to small-scale and informal traders, the OSBP and the coming of the LAPSET project has generated a sense of hope in a region where conflict is prevalent and life as a trader often precarious. As the chairperson of Bilka Women Traders Association asserts, ‘In the next five to ten years they can envisage changes through the opening of the one-stop border post for easy flow of goods and ensuring good relations among the local cross-border communities’.<sup>66</sup>

Here, the fact that the town is now considered a trade corridor has prompted expectations not just around related infrastructure, but the perceived indirect benefits that will accrue from having acquired this status. For example, *mitumba* sellers have hopes that their lot will improve, enabling them not to have to ‘vacate their stalls every time it rains heavily’.<sup>67</sup> At the same time, the presence of the OSBP is—at least according to national and county government officials—attracting valuable support to the area in the form of NGO funds and involvement. More specifically, a national-level official claims that ‘While the OSBP may not have been operationalized, it has attracted many donors creating opportunities for cross-border peacebuilding initiatives’.<sup>68</sup> A county official, meanwhile, is of the opinion that ‘at least the county government is building a community of cross-border traders for peacebuilding and social cohesion. This is supported by NGOs like SND, and Caritas among others’.<sup>69</sup>

Given that, according to the chairperson of Bilka Women Traders Association, the ‘real border traders and the local community’ have so far been unable to engage with the OSBP directly because they are considered too small-scale,<sup>70</sup> the phrase ‘when it will be opened to small-scale traders’<sup>71</sup> provides an important indicator of how small-scale traders have invested their future ambitions in the OSBP and the Moyale corridor project more generally.

Such developments coincide with the narrative of a turning point having been reached as a result of lessons learnt from previous episodes of violence. This viewpoint was expressed by several traders and groups in interviews, with one representative quote being, ‘In 2014, around April, people [referring to those in Moyale] realized that the war has got no benefit and decided to come together’.<sup>72</sup>

Currently, Moyale is subject to various efforts aimed at building and sustaining peace. These are not only driven by big players such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development

66 Interview with chairperson of Bilka Women Traders Association, Moyale, January 2024.

67 Interview second-hand clothes trader, Moyale, January 2024.

68 Interview with KNCC/COMESA information desk officer, Moyale, January 2024.

69 Interview with, sub-county trade officer, Moyale, January 2024.

70 Interview with chairperson of Bilka Women Traders Association, Moyale, January 2024.

71 Interview with shoes/clothes trader, Moyale, January 2024

72 Interview with shoes/clothes trader, Moyale, January 2024.

and national government commissions, but grassroots movements, such as the women's associations that have practically and discursively created peace narratives aimed at avoiding any reoccurrence of previous conflagrations: 'The security situation in Moyale is good as there is no hiccup recently. However, occasionally, there are gunshots around the border area that nobody talks about'.<sup>73</sup> More generally, there appears to be a consensus that a repeat of the levels of violence seen in 2013 is unlikely.

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73 Interview with KRA station supervisor, Moyale, January 2024. For a more detailed examination of the intersection of ethno-territorial conflict around the OSBP, see Sowa, Katrin. "Little Dubai" in the Crossfire: Trade Corridor Dynamics and Ethno-Territorial Conflict in the Kenyan-Ethiopian Border Town Moyale. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 17/3 (2023): 424-44. doi:10.1080/17531055.2023.2265042.

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As this report has demonstrated, a number of complex trade, gender and conflict dynamics intersect at the Moyale border point. While many of these can be traced back to deep-rooted historical circumstances, the opening of the OSBP, the anticipated arrival of the LAPSET project and the impacts of Kenyan devolution have all wrought major changes in the local socio-political landscape. Women, who make up the majority of the area's small-scale informal traders, are especially affected. Having been excluded from using the OSBP—or at least perceiving this to be the case—small-scale traders are being driven towards the two main alternative routes crossing the Kenya–Ethiopia border, where they are often subject to official crackdowns and extractions on what is officially deemed illegal smuggling. Even so, the status of such cross-border trade remains a grey area, with supposedly illicit goods taxed by revenue authorities and providing a significant source of income for the Kenyan county government in particular.

Irrespective of the various challenges posed by the current situation, many local traders take a broadly positive view of what the future holds. Although the region has long been characterized by inter-ethnic distrust, which has had a profound impact on cross-border trade, there is a general perception that the widespread violence seen in previous years is now a thing of the past. Here, the many women's groups and associations that have sprung up during the past decade have a key role to play in ensuring peaceful cross-border and inter-ethnic interactions. Moreover, despite the complaints voiced about the OSBP, there is an expectation that small-scale traders will be able to make full use of the official border crossing before too long, and that they stand to benefit from the coming trade corridor. Time will tell whether these expectations are fulfilled.

In the meantime, there are a number of actions that authorities at a regional, county and national level can take to address the obstacles faced by small-scale traders, and women especially. At a regional level, there needs to be a greater focus on communicating existing and forthcoming cross-border protocols to small-scale traders. This should be accompanied by active policies aimed at integrating such traders into the cross-border formalization project. While this is ongoing, an appropriate degree of tolerance needs to be shown towards informal trade and those conducting it. Meanwhile, both the national and county governments should involve themselves in sensitizing small-scale traders and the local community more widely to the OSBP. At the same time, due recognition should be granted to the ability of the area's women to navigate shifting political conditions and conflict on the border, which in practical terms translates into committing more resources to bolster the efforts of women's groups and associations.

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