

LEGALLY INFORMAL WOMEN, CONFLICT AND CROSS- BORDER TRADE IN THE MANDERA TRI-BORDER AREA

Dalle Abraham

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CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT
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XCEPT PROGRAMME

This report is a product of the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme. XCEPT brings together leading local and international experts to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the factors that shape violent and peaceful behaviour. The programme carries out research to better understand the causes and impacts of conflict in border areas and their international dimensions. Funded by UK International Development, XCEPT offers actionable research to inform policies and programmes that support peace, and builds the skills of local partners. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

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MAP DESIGN

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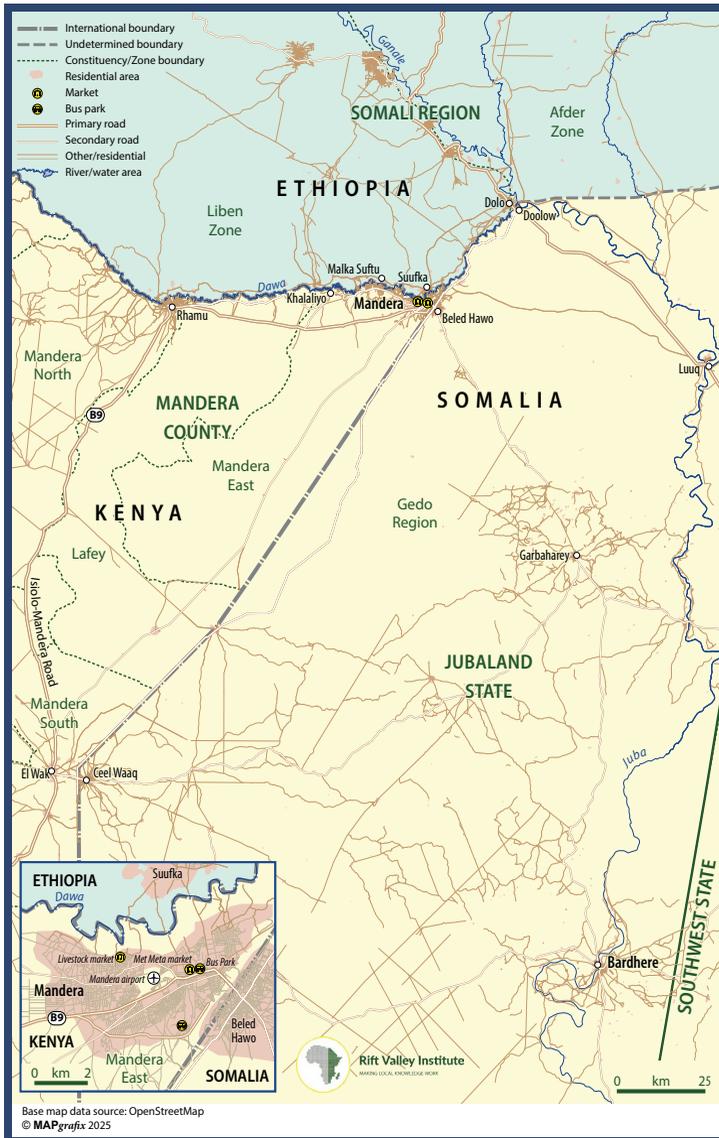
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MAP



SUMMARY

- In the Mandera triangle—a pastoralist region encompassing the point at which the borders of Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia meet—the reality of local and cross-border trade often diverges widely from official state policies of control. This disjunction has created a grey zone in which policy contradictions form an integral part of the regulatory environment. With this backdrop in mind, the report explores how small-scale women traders work to secure their livelihoods, damp down conflict and navigate shifting political sands.
- Changing lifestyle and livelihood habits, alongside internal or cross-border displacement and the opportunities presented by Kenyan devolution, have led to rising numbers of women in Mandera playing a critical role in household income. As such, engaging in small-scale cross-border trade has had a transformative impact for many of the area's women, with the marketplace serving as an important arena for increasing their agency.
- Although the Kenya–Somalia border has officially been closed for trade since 2011, practices on the ground are marked by a fair degree of openness. By contrast, Ethiopia has been vocal in criticizing informal/unregulated/illicit cross-border trade, and backed this up with action.
- Informal taxation rates follow stable arrangements known among traders, transporters and the police. This creates a predictable environment that helps protect small-scale cross-border traders from the fluctuating demands of rogue police officers. Thus, rent-seeking has created a kind of symbiotic relationship, with small-scale traders incorporating the exploitative behaviour of border control police officers into their trade-based norms.
- Kenyan intentions to re-open the border and formalize cross-border trade have been received with varying degrees of enthusiasm by different actors in Mandera. While some are unconcerned about the potential re-opening of the border, others are anxious about the associated formalization investments that have been proposed. When the Kenyan and Somali governments jointly announced a reopening plan in May 2023 there was a significant increase in the number and severity of terror attacks.
- Women have responded to emerging market needs with adaptive strategies. For instance, new tarmac roads and street lights have made it easier for women to sell food along the streets into the early evening. On the other hand, women have sometimes exerted their agency by resisting investments aimed at making markets more formal without due regard for existing market arrangements.

- The emergence of a transnational peace infrastructure led by government agencies in close collaboration with local civil society organizations and cultural institutions has reinforced a positive trend towards women's empowerment. Moreover, peace committees involving women's groups from all three border points have created a diverse network that now provides an important platform for members to share both their personal experiences and important market information. Peace WhatsApp groups are also used to place orders for goods and commodities, or ask for business advice.
- Despite the tensions associated with 'negotiated democracy' and the patriarchal biases evident in county government following the Kenyan devolution process, efforts have been made to benefit women traders and women-owned businesses, including awarding them contracts. Access to such contracts is, however, based first and foremost on ethnicity. Thus, despite the shared challenges they face, the region's women are often constrained by ethno-national demands.

ABBREVIATIONS

EAC	East African Community
ICU	Islamic Courts Union
KDF	Kenya Defence Forces
OSBP	one-stop border post
PoEs	ports of entry and exit
SACCO	savings and credit cooperative

INTRODUCTION

In the Mandera triangle—the point at which the borders of Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia meet—the reality of local and cross-border trade practices often diverges widely from official state policies of control. This disjunction has created a grey zone in which policy contradictions form an integral part of the regulatory environment. In turn, this has provided a degree of stability, with government control present in theory but unimplemented in practice.

This seeming paradox can be seen in the Kenyan government's poorly implemented border closure policy. Despite the fact that the Kenya–Somalia border has officially been closed for trade since October 2011, plans are in place for the expansion and formalization of border posts. These plans reflect a local reality in which people, livestock and goods can travel largely uninhibited across the border. Moreover, it exposes the gulf between the Kenyan government's stated position and its actual (lack of) capacity to fulfil these purported aims. In terms of the border issue, the tension lies in balancing a desire to enable legal cross-border trade and the need to ensure this does not contribute to insecurity.

The Mandera triangle is further characterized by a diverse array of authorities and informal subnational entities and interests. This complex, often contradictory, interplay of actors and competing interests has led to a dynamic frontier economy, with cross-border communities developing extensive alliances, financial networks and commercial mechanisms.¹ Thus, amid a situation where the state acts unofficially as a 'co-producer of illicit practices',² small-scale women traders must find viable means of securing their livelihoods, damping down conflict and navigating shifting political sands.

With the above jumping-off point in mind, this report explores how small-scale women traders negotiate the dynamics of trade and conflict in the Mandera triangle, in particular the role played by the decentralized political environment in which they operate. Following a brief outline of the methodology employed, the next section provides an overview of the dynamics at play in the Mandera tri-border area, including the impact of the Kenya–Somalia border closure. The analysis then turns to women's involvement in cross-border trade in the region, setting

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- 1 Lee Cassannelli, 'The Opportunistic Economics of the Kenya–Somali Borderland in Historical Perspective', in *Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa*, eds. Dereje Feyissa and Markus V. Hoehne, Martlesham, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2010.
 - 2 Jacob Rasmussen, 'Sweet Secrets: Sugar Smuggling and State Formation in the Kenya–Somalia Borderlands', DIIS Working Paper 2017: 11, Govsea Paper Series, Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2019.

out what goods are involved, how they are transported, and the challenges small-scale women traders face. We then explore how Kenyan devolution has affected women's participation in Mandera's cross-border trade, together with the role women have played in maintaining the peace necessary to facilitate such trade. Finally, the conclusion sums up the key points made in the report and looks to what the future might bring.

METHODOLOGY

Both primary and secondary data informs this study. In terms of the latter, an extensive review of the growing body of literature on the Mandera triangle was conducted,³ while the former consisted of fieldwork carried out in January 2024 using qualitative data collection methods. In total, 27 interviews were conducted, with 15 women and 12 men.

Study participants were contacted at five market places in Mandera, including Met Meta, Bus Park, various livestock markets and the *Miraa* Market. Several life-story interviews with small-scale traders in these markets were also conducted.⁴ Some traders were randomly selected at the markets, while others were deliberately targeted based on the commodities they trade (*khat/miraa*,⁵ milk, livestock), the roles they play (as large-scale exporters or market committee members), their business level (e.g. small-scale retail, wholesale), or simply their knowledge and experience. Observation of trading activities across the region's trading routes, markets and informal border points was also employed.

In addition, a range of other actors involved in cross-border trade, cross-border peace and

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- 3 On the dispossessions that followed policy change around opening up of Northern Kenya, see: Ngala Chome, 'Land, livelihoods and belonging: negotiating change and anticipating LAPSET in Kenya's Lamu County', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 14/2 (2020): 310–331; Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA), 'A BORESHA Policy Study on Cross Border Trade', February 2021. Accessed 21 March 2025, <https://boreshahoa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/BORESHA-Policy-Study-on-Cross-Border-Trade-1-1.pdf>; Peter D. Little, 'Unofficial Trade When States Are Weak: The Case of Cross-border Livestock Trade in the Horn of Africa', in *Pastoralism in Africa: Past, Present and Future*, eds. Michael Bollig, Michael Schnegg and Hans-Peter Wotzka, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013; and Rasmussen, 'Sweet Secrets'. On devolution, see: Brendon J. Cannon and Jacob Haji Ali, 'Devolution in Kenya Four Years On: A Review of Implementation and Effects in Mandera County', *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 8/1 (2018); Neil Carrier and Hassan H. Kochore, 'Navigating ethnicity and electoral politics in northern Kenya: The case of the 2013 election', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8/1 (2014); Cassannelli, 'Opportunistic Economies'; Hannah Whittaker, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Kenya: A Social History of the Shifita Conflict, c.1963–1968*, Leiden: Brill, 2015; Nene Mburu, *Bandits on the Border: The Last Frontier in the Search for Somali Unity*, Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 2005; Vincent Bakpetu Thomson, *Conflict in the Horn of Africa: The Kenya–Somalia Border problem 1941–2014*, University Press of America, 2015; Keren Witzenberg, *We Do Not Have Borders: Greater Somalia and the Predicaments of Belonging in Kenya*, New African Histories, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2017.
- 4 This involved collecting in-depth, personal narratives about life experiences and reflections on life trajectories.
- 5 *Khat* is a mildly narcotic plant (*Catha edulis*) native to the Horn of Africa, referred to as '*miraa*' in Kenya.

conflict work acted as key informants, including county government officials, municipal officers, national government officials, cooperative society officers, bankers, the local branch of the Kenya National Chamber of Commerce and civil society organizations (CSOs).

BACKGROUND: THE MANDERA TRI-BORDER AREA

The Mandera triangle is a pastoralist region encompassing the border towns of Beled Hawo in Somalia, Malka Suftu in Ethiopia and Mandera in Kenya. Although the three towns are peripheral to their respective states, their geographical proximity to each other means they enjoy close connections with their respective neighbours, which facilitates cross-border trade. At the same time, the tri-border area has a long history of instability, with multiple clans and political factions competing for dominance. This is compounded by the presence of organized crime networks and extremist groups such as al-Shabaab.

Mandera town is the headquarters of the Mandera county government and consequently much more developed than either Beled Hawo (over the Somali border) or Malka Suftu (over the Ethiopian border). Despite Mandera's marginalized status within Kenya, residents speak of the town as a regional hub, plugged into diverse transnational markets and regional trade networks. The distance between the three towns and their respective capitals is an important factor in the rise of the Mandera tri-border area as a significant trade hub. Mandera town is 1,180 km away from Nairobi, with insecurity and bad roads making access to the Kenyan capital difficult. By contrast, it is 540 km away from Mogadishu.

Although Kenya's border with Somalia has officially been closed since 2011, Somalia remains the fifth most popular destination for Kenyan goods on the continent, ahead even of Ethiopia.⁶ This is reflected by the brisk business conducted in the Mandera triangle, with extensive movement of commodities between all three countries. The Kenyan government, however, labels this booming cross-border trade 'informal' and a 'local arrangement'.⁷ In effect, cross-border trade in the Mandera triangle falls into the ambiguous category of 'legally informal', with Kenyan enforcement of the official border closure only ever partial at best. For example, there is limited official effort to halt livestock movements given how important the trade is for both the Kenyan livestock sector and the wider economy.⁸ As a local government official in Mandera observes: 'You cannot stop people and goods from flowing. The goods moving into Kenya, Malka Suftu in Ethiopia and Beled Hawo in Somalia are not for exporting but are used locally within the

6 Brian Ambani, 'Kenya exports to Somalia up 76pc after resumption of miraa trade', *Nation*, 14 September 2023. Accessed 28 August 2024, <https://nation.africa/kenya/business/kenya-exports-somalia-up-76pc-on-miraa-boost-4368170>.

7 Interview with government official, Mandera, 12 January 2024, Male.

8 Little, 'Unofficial Trade'.

towns.⁹

Further complicating matters are the varying bilateral relations between the three countries. While Ethiopia and Kenya enjoy relatively amenable relations, Somalia has traditionally been viewed as an aggressor by both countries due to the post-independence expansionist campaigns it embarked on in the 1960s and 1970s. It was largely as a result of this that Kenya and Ethiopia signed a friendship treaty in 1979 pledging lasting amity.¹⁰

In sum, the Mandera triangle is a unique crucible where differences in national economies and political orientation have encouraged a flourishing cross-border trade. More recently, the effects of climate change and livelihood disruptions, alongside internal or cross-border displacement and the opportunities presented by Kenyan devolution, have led to rising numbers of women in Mandera playing a critical role in household income. Many have chosen to become small-scale traders, beginning small and then seeking to diversify into other businesses as a means of securing their livelihoods. In doing so, women are able to draw on clan and kinship ties to obtain credit. Small-scale cross-border trade has therefore had a transformative impact for many of the area's women, with the marketplace serving as an important arena for increasing their agency. As one woman trader asserts, 'The market has helped us. We know what our children and dependents want and we can afford to give this to them. We work. Otherwise, you only rely on men and they control you.'¹¹

Over time, these traders have learned to navigate the prevailing cross-border complexities that mark the region's business and regulatory environments, extracting whatever benefit is to be found. In other words, business is not conducted *in spite of* cross-border differences, but *as a result of* them.

A (BRIEF) HISTORY OF BORDER CLOSURE AND CONTROL

In recent decades, the Mandera triangle has seen a revolving cast of actors attempt to take control. These include the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), which briefly controlled southern Somalia during 2006–2007; al-Shabaab, which grew out of the ICU following the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2006; the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF), which have had a presence in southern Somalia since 2011; and the African Union peacekeeping forces AMISOM (African Union Mission in Somalia), now known as AUSSOM (African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia). Each of these actors has influenced the operation of informal economic activities in the cross-border region.

Official policy changes have variously inhibited or favoured certain actors, forcing many

9 Interview with government official, Mandera, 12 January 2024, Male. The definition of what is considered 'local consumption of goods' is, however, ambiguous.

10 Thomson, *Conflict in the Horn of Africa*.

11 Interview with trader, Mandera, 17 January 2024, Female.

to adopt innovative ways of navigating such changes. Some of these changes have followed unilateral declarations, such as Kenya's closing of the border in 2011 or its introduction of new currency notes in 2019, which negatively impacted many businesses in Ethiopia and Somalia.¹² Other changes have been actively punitive, such as Kenya's shutdown of the *hawala* system, a traditional money transfer system—including 13 money transfer firms, and 85 individual and entities' bank accounts—following the 2015 al-Shabaab attacks on Garissa University.¹³ Even though the ban was lifted three months later by the Kenyan president, it dealt a great blow to business and trade.

The Kenyan government's official policy is to limit cross-border trade and movement, including through the proposed construction of a 700 km border fence.¹⁴ Although only small sections of the fence currently exist, its construction forms a key part of the Kenyan government's securitization agenda. This is despite the planned fence contradicting both Kenyan intentions to re-open its border with Somalia, and the admission of Somalia into the East African Community (EAC). More pertinently, it is at odds with practicalities on the ground. For example, residents on both sides of the border—in Mandera and Beled Hawo—have expressed their rejection of a physical barrier by demolishing concrete fence posts.¹⁵ Controversy has been further inflamed by media reports on the amount of money spent on what is, effectively, a non-existent fence. A Kenyan member of parliament sums up the situation as follows: 'A fence cannot stop the Somalis. ... A wall can't and won't work. Despite billions of shillings [KES] used on it, it hasn't worked.'¹⁶

Thus, despite the officially declared Kenya–Somalia border closure, practices on the ground are marked by a fair degree of openness. In general, free movement of people is permitted, with opportunities available for cross-border travellers to negotiate their passage with both official and informal authorities.

By contrast, Ethiopia has been vocal in criticizing cross-border trade, and backed this up with action.¹⁷ Elaborate local-level surveillance mechanisms enable the Ethiopian authorities to keep

12 Interview with bank manager, Mandera, 16 January 2024, Male.

13 'Kenya shuts down somali-linked money transfer firms', *BBC*, 8 April 2015. Accessed 15 March 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32216498>.

14 Paul Gitau, 'Building of Kenya–Somalia border wall begins', *The Standard*, no date (2016). Accessed 28 August 2024, <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/counties/article/2000158488/building-of-kenya-somalia-border-wall-begins>.

15 Idara, 'Kenya/Somalia Border Wall Brought Down', *Kenya News*, April 27 2019. Accessed 18 August 2024, <https://www.kenyanews.go.ke/kenya-somalia-border-wall-brought-down/>.

16 Interview with member of parliament, Mandera, 12 January 2024, Male.

17 Peter D Little, 'Global Trade, Local Realities: Why African States Undervalue Pastoralism', in *Lands of the Future: Anthropological Perspectives on Pastoralism, Land Deals and Tropes of Modernity in Eastern Africa*, eds. Echi Christina Gabbert, Fana Gebresenbet, John G. Galaty and Günther Schlee, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2021.

track of what and where its citizens choose to trade. More generally, the Ethiopian economy is characterized as a command (or planned) economy, which diverges markedly from the Somali economy's minimal regulatory environment, where third-party interest groups such as al-Shabaab often shape commodity flows through checkpoints.

The Mandera triangle has experienced a long history of border closure and control dating back to colonial times. Most recently, in October 2011, a Kenyan presidential directive closed the border as a security measure. This followed the Kenyan military intervention in Somalia under operation *Linda Nchi* (Protect the Country), a response to a series of cross-border attacks by al-Shabaab. In particular, the 2011 presidential directive closed down gazetted ports of entry and exit (PoEs) in Mandera, Liboi in Garissa and Kiunga in Lamu.¹⁸ It also halted further development on some of the gazetted but non-operational PoEs, and slowed down the development of proposed PoEs elsewhere.¹⁹

Although previous border closures were common, they were inevitably lifted shortly thereafter, causing only temporary disruption to cross-border trade. By contrast, the prolonged border closure since 2011 has prompted the development of new norms and practices. Despite some local observers pointing to the closure as a means of preventing the proliferation of arms and the smuggling of unregulated, untested, contaminated, condemned or expired goods into Kenyan markets, reality belies such intentions.²⁰

The uneven manner in which the border closure is enforced has produced other ambiguities. Although the 2011 closure has never officially been lifted, further mini-closures have since been declared by actors at both the national and local state levels. In June 2019, for example, amid professed plans by the Kenyan authorities to re-open the Somalia border, the Lamu county police commander shut down a section of the border at Kiunga over fears of a new secessionist group benefitting from trade in contraband.²¹ The following year, Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta declared the Kenya-Somalia border closed as part of COVID-19 control measures.²²

18 Office of the President, Ministry of Interior and National Administration and State Department for Immigration & Citizen Services, Republic of Kenya, 'Gazetted Ports of Entry and Exit (PoEs) and Location'. Accessed 28 August 2024, <https://immigration.go.ke/border-management/gazetted-ports-of-entry-and-exit-poes-and-location/>.

19 Office of the President, Ministry of Interior and National Administration and State Department for Immigration & Citizen Services, Republic of Kenya, 'Proposed PoEs'. Accessed 28 August 2024, <https://immigration.go.ke/border-management/proposed-poes/>.

20 Interview with Bank Manager, Mandera, 16 January 2024, Male.

21 'Kenya shuts Somalia border as secessionist group raises eyebrows', *The Daily Nation*, 11 June 2019. Accessed 20 June 2024, <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/kenya-shuts-somalia-border-as-secessionist-group-raises-eyebrows-176144>.

22 'Kenya seals borders with Somalia and Tanzania to contain COVID-19', *Kenya News Agency*, 16 May 2020. Accessed 20 June 2024, <https://www.kenyanews.go.ke/kenya-seals-borders-with-somalia-and-tanzania-to-contain-covid-19/>.

These mini-closures, which fail to acknowledge the longstanding 2011 border closure, are often arbitrary and punitive. Moreover, they fail to make reference to existing laws and are not followed by legal gazette notices. Technically, then, such declarations are ‘informally legal’—as opposed to the ‘legally informal’ status attached to cross-border trade. These ad hoc closures demonstrate how, at various times, the Kenyan state embraces or actively manufactures ambiguities concerning the border’s status. This cultivated vagueness about the legality or formality of border governance has justified arbitrary state control like the frequent network shutdowns in Mandera which sometimes can go on for days. Residents of Mandera say such network shutdowns are normal and are experienced when the government is moving troops or when there are suspected al-Shabaab operatives in the area. The primary driver of the Kenyan state’s policy at the border is security and not revenue. The impact of this policy on trade is immense.²³

On 15 May 2023, Kenya agreed to officially re-open select border points with Somalia in Mandera, Lamu and Garissa.²⁴ In early July 2023, however, this decision was put on indefinite hold due to a significant increase in al-Shabaab attacks in the border region.²⁵ The situation shows no sign of being resolved in the short term, and has been exacerbated by the fact that Somalia formally joined the EAC in November 2023 without establishing a border regulation mechanism. This carries long-term implications, presenting new challenges for cross-border trade in the Mandera triangle and elsewhere: ‘With Somalia’s border not fully regulated, the EAC customs union—a fundamental component of EAC integration—poses the prospect of becoming not a door to trade but a barrier.’²⁶

23 Interview with Government official, phone call, 20 December 2024, Male.

24 ‘Kenya agrees to reopen Somalia border after 12-year closure’, *The East African*, 15 May 2023. Accessed 28 August 2024, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/kenya-agrees-to-reopen-somalia-border-after-12-year-closure-4235656>.

25 ‘Kenya postpones reopening border with Somalia’, *africanews*, 5 July 2023. Accessed 28 August 2024, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/07/05/kenya-postpones-reopening-of-border-with-somalia/>.

26 Farhia Mohamud, ‘Opportunities and Challenges for Somalia’s Membership to the East African Community’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2024, 12.

WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN CROSS-BORDER TRADE

Mandera serves as a critical gateway for commodity flows in northern Kenya and the Jubaland and Gedo regions of Somalia, which host six towns: Beled Hawo (on the border), Dolo, Garbaharey, Boru Hache, Bardere and Luq. It also serves the South West region of Somalia, including Baidoa province and the Bakool region.²⁷ This places Mandera at the centre of large-scale commodity and capital movements, facilitated by a thriving telecommunications environment. Access to telecom networks and digital money transfer system has eased small scale women traders' participation.

Small-scale cross-border trading in the Mandera triangle is dominated by women. As an official from the Mandera chamber of commerce asserts: 'Women are involved in all manner of businesses in the border trade. People now rely on small-scale trade and women are the ones who control that sector.'²⁸ The highly diversified market place is reflected in the range of businesses and breadth of products traded by women in Mandera, Beled Hawo and Malka Suftu. In part, this diversification has arisen from the adoption of new economic and livelihood strategies. For example, there is now more irrigation-fed agriculture along the river Daua, as well as an increase in rainfed crop farming. The number of women crossing the border at Malka Suftu every morning to sell their locally grown tomatoes, onions, bananas and lemons—among other produce—highlights both the increased role and productivity of pastoralist women, and a shift in attitudes regarding non-traditional livelihood economies such as small-scale crop production.

The diverse cross-border trade taking place in the region not only meets wide-ranging market demands, but allows women traders to engage in multiple small-scale businesses, thereby spreading their risks between them. For example, one interviewee runs a hotel alongside her work as a furniture vendor: the latter is capital intensive and slow moving, but promises big returns, while the former provides small returns on a daily basis. As the trader explains: 'Women want small ventures to feed their children but a business like furniture is slow moving, needs big capital and requires a lot of patience.'²⁹

More generally, women have responded to emerging market needs with adaptive strategies. For

27 Interview with chamber of commerce official, Mandera, 12 January 2024, Male.

28 Interview with chamber of commerce official, Mandera, 12 January 2024, Male.

29 Interview with trader, Mandera, 9 January 2024, Female.

instance, new tarmac roads and street lights at Mandera Bus Park Market have made it easier for women to sell food along the streets into the early evening. On the other hand, women have sometimes exerted their agency by resisting investments aimed at making markets more formal without due regard for existing market arrangements. One example of this is Mandera county government's decision to build a new *miraa* market—hailed by officials as 'progressive'—less than 200 metres away from the existing one, without consulting the women who operate their businesses from the latter. Consequently, the new market remains empty and overgrown. Even so, Mandera's trade development officers continue to envision a future where markets resemble malls, industrial complexes and modern facilities. A senior respondent in the County Government of Mandera's Department of Trade, Investments and Industrialization referred to a proposal aimed at transforming the Bus Park Market into a modern market, and there are plans for an industrial park to process fruits and locally produced vegetables. Should such aspirations come to fruition, it would likely have profound implications for the cross-border trade local women are engaged in.

THE GOODS THAT MOVE

Mandera town is a hub bustling with different markets nestled close together or in the same side of the town and others like the Livestock and Miraa market being located some distance away. The Markets bear different names with notable markets being the Met Meta and Bus Park markets. At the centre of all these are hundreds of stallholders who sell items of clothing, foodstuffs and provide other essential commodities and services. The market is segregated according to the scale and services offered—for example, entire sections are occupied by tailors sewing the latest *derra* and *buibui* (traditional garments associated with the Swahili/Muslim coastal region) designs, while other stalls offer jewellery, imported clothes or household items. Other markets specialize in wholesale food items like the Met Meta market. The times of peak operation also varies between the different markets at between 6.00 a.m. and 7.00 a.m. the vegetable market is already full and busy. The Miraa market is vibrant between 9.00 a.m. to 10.00 a.m. when the miraa lorries arrive. Then there is the livestock market which starts operating at around 10.00 a.m. with businesses seeming to slow down significantly from around midday.

The market is constantly abuzz with goods-laden trailers, lorries and land cruisers travelling to and from various places in Kenya. Commodities may move in different directions between countries at various times, depending on price variations and availability. Also important is the size and/or quality of a particular commodity—for instance, bigger, better-quality (more expensive), high-density mattresses from Kenya are transported into Somalia, while cheaper, smaller, low-density mattresses manufactured in Beled Hawo are transported to markets in both Kenya and Ethiopia. Each of the countries in the tri-border region has comparative advantages when it comes to specific commodities (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE ON COMMODITIES BY COUNTRY³⁰

COUNTRY	MANUFACTURED GOODS	FOOD ITEMS	LIVESTOCK
KENYA TO SOMALIA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cement • Gypsum boards • Mattresses • Wood • Plastic goods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Processed wheat flour • Potatoes • Onions • <i>Khat/miraa</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goats • Camels • Cattle
KENYA TO ETHIOPIA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iron sheets • Beds • <i>Jikos</i> • Plastic • Aluminium kettles • Recycled plastic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tea leaves • Milk • Processed cooking oil 	
SOMALIA TO KENYA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cheap low-density mattress • Synthetic wares • Cotton wears • Garments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sugar • Rice • Milk • Spaghetti • Processed Cooking Oil • Sweets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goats • Camels • Cows
SOMALIA TO ETHIOPIA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cement • Cheap low-density mattress • Plastic appliances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sugar • Milk 	
ETHIOPIA TO KENYA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Floor mats • Curtains 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Macaroni • Pasta • Sugar • Maize • Beans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cows • Goats • Camels
ETHIOPIA TO SOMALIA		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beans • Maize 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goats • Camels • Cows

Source: Dalle Abraham, interviews. Note: Blank cells indicate the absence of any specific comparative advantage

While each of the commodities listed in Table 1 offers insights into the dynamics of cross-border trade, several in particular shed light on the role played by small-scale women traders. In Mandera, women of all ages work as *miraa* exporters or run local *miraa* cafes known as '*dashkis*'. The commodity offering a relatively easy means by which women can enter the trade sector, regardless of the challenges they face, be this famine, drought or displacement due to conflict or divorce. Starting a retail *miraa* business is cheap, does not require much capital, and the market for *miraa* is generally stable, thus offering reliable earnings. A woman *miraa* trader elaborates

30 There is also a cross-border trade between Ethiopia and Somalia which happens about 50 km from Suufu town at Dollo Ado the Somalia town / Dollow the Ethiopian town. This also makes direct trade between Ethiopia and Somalia invisible to Kenyan trade. Trade between Ethiopia and Somalia at the Mandera triangle must pass through Kenya, which makes Kenya an important cross-border player in this triangle.

thus: ‘Every big business needs a lot of money. Some need millions. But for *miraa*, you can be given credit. Other women also help one another. Poor women can easily go into this business. They organize with one another.’³¹

As pointed out by several interviewees, many women start trading *miraa* in order to accumulate capital and develop business networks, before branching out into other forms of business. Importantly, the *miraa* trade offers opportunities to spread risk while diversifying into ventures that are non-seasonal and/or unaffected by conflict or regimes of control. For example, one woman *miraa* vendor spends the early morning hours at Mandera’s *Miraa* Market, quickly dispatching her *miraa* stocks to various destinations in Somalia and Ethiopia. She then heads to Greenpark Mall to open her shop, selling clothes from 11.00 a.m. into the late evening. Engaging in different businesses also allows women to access multiple supply networks. Unsurprisingly, then, many successful businesswomen in markets across Mandera began as simple *miraa* vendors at *Miraa* Market.³² It is worth noting, however, that while the *miraa* trade offers a route to bigger and better livelihoods for some women, others in the trade end up leaving due to the negative light in which the Islamic religion views the trade: ‘I stopped my *miraa* business because it wasn’t doing well but also because our religion doesn’t accept it.’³³ More recently some small towns and centres within Mandera passed declarations banning the consumption of *miraa*.

The livestock sector (cattle, camels, goats and sheep) reveals other important cross-border trade characteristics, including shifting trade dynamics and even the gendered nature of some of the trade. For example, at the livestock market, women are mostly involved in the trade of small stock. All the towns around Mandera—Banisa, Takaba Laffey, Rhamu and Moyale—bring their livestock to Mandera’s livestock market. Although there are no major livestock markets at the Ethiopian and Somali border points, there is a small feeder market in Beled Hawo, where livestock is purchased and brought to Mandera. More recently, the relative stability of Somalia’s federal government and improved ease of doing business, combined with the strength of the US dollar in Somaliland, have helped shift the direction of the cross-border livestock trade. A livestock broker at Mandera Livestock Market had the following to say on how the value of the US dollar has affected supply and demand across various markets:

Drought and famine have increased demand for livestock but the fluctuation in US dollar prices is affecting us more so at this market. If a goat is sold for 100 dollars in Hargeisa because of the exchange value, it’s more profitable to sell it in Somalia and more expensive in Kenya. So livestock traders follow the dollar. They take their livestock there [where it is most profitable].³⁴

31 Interview with retail *miraa* trader, Mandera, 10 January 2024, Female.

32 Interview with retail *miraa* trader, Mandera, 10 January 2024, Female.

33 Interview with retail trader, Mandera, 7 January 2024, Female.

34 Interview with livestock trader, Mandera, 8 January 2024, Male.

The livestock trade in cattle and camels is overwhelmingly dominated by men, with women's involvement in the sector generally limited to sheep and goats. This gendered distribution of labour is attributed to the strength needed to handle cattle and camels, which women are assumed to lack. When it comes to goat and sheep, however, women are involved at all levels, from local consumption to export. With their sheep tied to stakes in the ground, women can be observed at the Mandera Livestock Market sitting on plastic chairs under the shade of acacia trees haggling over prices, some acting as brokers, others as middle women.

Poorer women not involved in the livestock trade can also be seen at Madera Livestock Market selling fodder to livestock traders. Having got up early, they go to the banks of the river Daua and gather fresh grass to take to the market. This represents an essential complementary role at the livestock market, while there is also growing demand for fodder to feed the many donkeys involved in transporting commodities to and from Mandera's other markets, as well as for livestock kept at home.

METHODS OF MOVEMENT

Commodities flow along trade routes traversing diverse ethno-territories. As a senior government official indicates, 'We held cross-border meetings on the movement of goods and people to make it seamless and dynamic'.³⁵ Such local forms of coordination efforts and the negotiations that accompany them between the authorities on the ground are different from those at the national level. These are spontaneous, local and immediate. Any security incident is followed by such calls, meetings and updates. How successful these efforts have been is open to debate, with conflicts between different ethnic groups leading to relevant roads becoming highly risky or even impassable for traders, women included. Moreover, one previously preferred road along the border, which remains in good condition, has nevertheless been rendered impassable due to fears about al-Shabaab in Kenya. A youth leader in Mandera elaborates on the situation:

Goods and services that come to these markets and border points follow complex routes that pass through different clan territories. When there is conflict in a particular area, no goods come from Bula Hawo. When there is fighting in Rhamu, the *matatu* [minibus] business plus transport for goods is paralysed.³⁶

Similarly, a livestock trader observes:

There is no permanent peace. Even though there is no cattle or livestock rustling, traders and herders are killed and these affects livestock movements. Conflicts affect communities and that leads to territories becoming separated. People and livestock do not arrive in the

35 Interview with senior government official, Mandera, 12 January 2024, Male.

36 Interview with youth leader, Mandera, 7 January 2024, Male.

market through those areas.³⁷

The goods that arrive in Mandera, Beled Hawo and Malka Suftu pass through multiple actors, as well as a variety of informal taxation and regulatory regimes. While these transitions and local realities confer a tacit legitimacy on the goods, making them of acceptable quality, this does not necessarily translate into a formalized process. The payments involved include required transit and local informal tax obligations, alongside the costs associated with passing through checkpoints controlled by ethno-territorial, militia and al-Shabaab groups. On the positive side, the established operation of these often informalized processes frees cross-border small-scale traders from having to engage in formal business registrations and further negotiations—beyond those with police at border points. This informality thus benefits many women traders, who may not be able to access government services or have the necessary documents needed at government offices—particularly in a context where public services are underdeveloped.³⁸

The border post in Mandera, which serves both Ethiopia and Somalia, was established in 1981 and renovated in 2009—meaning it was only operational in its renewed form for a relatively brief period before the Kenya–Somalia border closure in October 2011.³⁹ The post—marked by a well-fenced compound containing offices and residential quarters for staff—sits on the Kenya–Somalia section. While the post seems designed to directly serve Kenya–Somalia trade, with a gate and a road connecting the two states, it is mostly closed. The border post, nevertheless, still serves trade between Kenya and Ethiopia. As a customs border control official explains: ‘All government agencies like the KRA [Kenya Revenue Authority], KEBS [Kenya Bureau of Standards], KePHIS [Kenya Plant Health Inspectorate Service] and immigration are here but many have left since there is no work.’⁴⁰

There are currently three alternative informal border points hidden amid thick bushes where goods, commodities and people move between Mandera in Kenya and Beled Hawo in Somalia: Jira Mandassi, Inni Bari and Kura Borre. These informal routes are manned by Kenyan police officers on the Kenyan side and Somali police on the Somali side.

Meanwhile, although the Kenya–Ethiopia border is not closed to trade, it is physically obstructed by the natural barrier of the river Daua and there are no official border posts or border control centres in this area. Instead, a mix of formal and informal trade flows between Kenya and Ethiopia via the Mandera border post. Three informal routes on the Kenyan side lead to the Kenya–Ethiopia border and river Daua crossing points: Helle Suuf, Dameer Dianne and Garba

37 Interview with livestock trader, Mandera, 7 January 2024, Male.

38 Tobias Hagmann and Finn Stepputat (eds), *Trade Makes States: Governing the Greater Somali Economy*, London: Hurst Publishers, 2023, 111.

39 A commemorative plaque at the border post indicates the rehabilitation was done by the International Organization for Migration, with funding from the people of Japan. It was handed over to the government of Kenya on 23 October 2009.

40 Interview with customs border control official, Mandera, 16 January 2024, Male.

Odho. These three form the only border and river crossing points between Kenya and Ethiopia. Even goods that have formally been cleared at the Mandera border post have to pass through these three border posts. Goods that come from Somalia have to pass through Kenyan territory to get to these river crossing points. Of the three posts, Helle Suuf is the most prominent, and is the site of a future planned bridge between Kenya and Ethiopia.

Because motor vehicles cannot cross the natural river barrier, this significantly slows trade across the Ethiopia-Kenya border and makes it difficult to evade rent-seeking police officers. Instead, lorries and trailers must offload their goods at the border points, which are then loaded onto taxis, donkey carts (*kareta*) or rafts, depending on the crossing point.

The *kareta*

The Donkey cart is indispensable for the Mandera triangle's mix of formal and informal trade. Referred to as *kareta* or *dameer gari* in Somali language, donkey carts can carry up to 50 kg bags of sugar or cement. Their easy maintenance and minimal operational cost suit the small-scale nature of the cross-border trade, including for women traders. One female *kareta* operator explained: 'I have used this *kareta* to raise my children and pay their fees. ... In one day, I get between KES 500–1,000 [USD 3.85–USD 7.70], depending on the business'.⁴¹ While their main role is to transport goods across the border, donkey cart operators also purchase goods for traders, effectively serving as both intermediaries and brokers. In addition, donkey cart operators handle rent-seeking police officers at border crossings and engage with other levels of authority, such as Mandera municipal revenue officers. Even though many women own such donkey carts, they normally hire men to operate them. These men serve both the menial role of loading and unloading the *karetas*.



A donkey cart (*dameer gari* or *kareta*) laden with goods from Somalia at a market in Mandera, 7 January 2024. Photo by Dalle Abraham.

41 Interview with *kareta* operator, Mandera, 7 January 2024.

All this places donkey cart operators in a strong position to relay market information to traders about new goods, potential deals and commodity prices—something female cross-border traders have taken advantage of. Even though men operate the *karetas*, an interesting dynamic observed during fieldwork is the number of women riding on donkey carts alongside male drivers. Some of the women are *kareta* owners who have been entrusted by other business owners to go make cash payments and purchases on their behalf as brokers. Others are small scale traders who follow their goods from the source market to their stalls. Engaging in this, at any level provides women with important market knowledge, helping them diversify their interests and move up from being *kareta* operators, brokers and commissioned agents to business owners. For example, one woman who had been a *kareta* operator for 15 years used her earnings to establish a food store business. Now, her *kareta* is operated on her behalf by young men from her neighbourhood, although it only makes two trips per day as, ‘Business is low and competition is high. It is difficult to compete with men.’ The menial nature of loading every bag of sugar makes it difficult for a *kareta* to be entirely operated by a woman.

At the same time, *karetas* are not subject to serious scrutiny at border posts, which renders them vulnerable to misuse. In 2024, for example, donkey carts were used by al-Shabaab to carry out terror attacks in two different locations, which may lead to greater scrutiny in future, curtailing trade.⁴²



Sacks of beans being offloaded from a raft from Ethiopia on the Kenyan side of Helle Suuf crossing of the River Daua, early in the morning, 11 January 2024. Photo by Dalle Abraham.

Rafts on the river Daua

The natural barrier of the river Daua has long placed limits on business and the movement of people between Kenya and Ethiopia, restricting travel to daylight hours via slow, crudely improvised rafts operated by men. The river embankments are steep and underdeveloped at the border crossing points, making it difficult to transfer goods from one mode of transport to another. This significantly impedes the ease with which goods move and increases the cost of

42 ‘5 Killed in donkey cart explosion in north eastern Kenya’, VOA News, 29 April 2024. Accessed 29 August 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/killed-in-donkey-cart-explosion-in-northeast-kenya/7589864.html>.

trade. The loading and unloading of goods to cross short distances and all the various forms of transportation could be avoided if trade were formalized. The rafts also help people cross into and out of Malka Suftu and Mandera, including small-scale women traders carrying their wares.

CHALLENGES OF DOING BUSINESS

Informal taxation rates follow stable arrangements known among traders, transporters and the police. This creates a predictable environment that helps protect small-scale cross-border traders—women among them—from the fluctuating demands of rogue police officers. As one wholesale importer/exporter describes it: ‘We know the police. They just take money, what we have agreed on. They do not take money for Kenyan goods. Only from what comes from Somalia and Ethiopia.’⁴³ Although these practices ensure market predictability, along with a degree of order and security, the agreed rates are subject to change in the wake of security incidents. When a donkey cart exploded at a border checkpoint in January 2024, for example, Kenyan police officers enforced stringent control of people and goods, leading to an increase in the amount people had to pay officers.

Nevertheless, a demonstrable political and economic order is adhered to by the state, traders and even radical groups, in whose mutual interest it is for normalcy to return after a violent incident. Any upset in this informal balance represents an inflection point that can spur insecurity. For example, local traders explained a series of attacks in Mandera in January 2024 were the result of a former Jubaland minister being arrested. Thus, there are strong incentives to maintain swift, amicable mediation between warring ethnic clans in order that trade can continue seamlessly. Women are also involved in these through peace committees and bodies like the Mandera women for peace.

Travel between the Mandera border and the one-stop border posts (OSBP) in Moyale—a distance of about 370 km—takes a whole day and costs KES 4,000–5,000 (USD 30.80 – 38.50) per person. This is at least two and a half times what it costs to travel from Marsabit to Nairobi a distance of 521 km at KES 2,000 and almost two times the cost between Nairobi and Moyale a distance of 744 km at KES 2,500. In other less peripheral parts of Kenya a 370 km trip costs roughly about KES 1,000. These obstacles are compounded by a transport system that is dominated by men and actively discourages the entry of new players. Moreover, there are at least 13 police checks and barriers along this stretch of the road, each of which requires the driver to part with money, to say nothing of the time wasted waiting for border officers who seek shelter from the sun under trees or on shop verandas some distance from the road blocks.

Overall, however, a certain level of tolerance, trust and expectation—driven by expediency—has developed between traders and police officers at the border posts. As such, the latter have become a key actor facilitating cross-border trade, with police charges factored into trade transaction costs. A trader describes the process as follows: ‘A sack of 50 kg is transported for

43 Interview with wholesale importer/exporter trader, Mandera, 17 January 2024.

KES 200 [USD 1.54] by a *kareta* operator. What he [or she] gives the police and pays the revenue people, including the municipal enforcement people, is within that amount. They are the ones who negotiate with the police.⁴⁴ As this indicates, rent-seeking has created a kind of symbiotic relationship, with small-scale traders normalizing the exploitative behaviour of border control police officers and incorporating it into their trade-based norms.

Although these arrangements have allowed cross-border trade to thrive, it raises major questions about the policy of border closure. On the one hand, the Kenyan government has established rules for taxation and official movement across the border. Thus, by definition, non-compliance with these rules constitutes illicit behaviour. On the other hand: ‘the active involvement of the KDF and other Kenyan state agencies in the illicit cross-border trade makes the Kenyan state a co-producer of illicit practices, thus effectively setting the state against itself.’⁴⁵ As such, the practices engaged in by small-scale cross-border women traders do not call into question the legitimacy of the authorities, but rather capitalize on the system’s weaknesses and loopholes. It should be noted, however, that on the Ethiopian side such predictable norms and behaviours are absent, meaning cross-border business can be disrupted without notice. In this respect, a 2021 study observes: ‘Traders have reported that the main issue they have faced at this border is Ethiopian security agencies seizing their goods and burning them without any consultation with other stakeholders.’⁴⁶

It is equally important to note that not all traders directly engage with the authorities, clan or militia in their day-to-day operations. There is an elaborate network of suppliers, brokers, transporters and agents who take up on the roles of negotiating with the authorities. Nonetheless, the women traders are aware of the complex web of players and routes through which their goods pass. For most traders, day to day encounters with both formal and informal authorities are delegated to commissioned agents, brokers and transporters, who engage them at the various markets and border crossing points. At the same time, traders must also engage with formal authorities at various levels—for example, dealing with county-level officials to get the required permits for business premises.

These contradictions can be explained as state pragmatism in allowing cross-border trade despite the official closure of the border. This is acknowledged by state officials, who point to the necessity of providing the residents of Mandera with cheap food and other essential goods. What these state officials fail to mention, however, is that this informal cross-border trade is mutually beneficial. Nor do they mention how a total shutdown could endanger the prevailing peace.

At the other end of the scale, Kenyan intentions to re-open the border and formalize cross-border trade have been received with varying degrees of enthusiasm by different actors in Mandera.

44 Interview with trader, Mandera, 17 January 2024, Female.

45 Rasmussen, ‘Sweet Secrets’.

46 OSSREA, ‘A BORESHA Policy Study’, 21.

While some women are indifferent to the potential re-opening of the border, others are anxious about the associated formalization investments that have been proposed. Some argue that reopening the border will bring in bigger players who will edge out small scale operators. While others worry that their services (loading, offloading, brokering, transportation) will no longer be needed. For example, plans for a bridge across the river Daua will not only result in loss of income for the young men operating cross-river rafts or working as loaders, but will render the donkey carts redundant. In this way, re-opening the border and formalizing cross-border trade will likely lead to the removal of numerous secondary players involved in this informal sector. *Kareta* owners, who are mostly women, will also likely be removed from the trade networks. The informal status quo also keeps the trade small scale meaning that women have more roles while formalization is feared to bring in bigger players with more capital.

One recent problem that has had a major impact on cross-border trade is the *el-Niño* rains, which have greatly disrupted the flow of goods and services around the Mandera tri-border area, at points virtually cutting off Mandera in a sea of flood water. To make matters worse, the Daua burst its banks in November 2023 and in May 2024, making the river un-navigable, displacing hundreds of people, washing thousands of farms and crops away and completely paralysing the movement of goods from Ethiopia into Kenya. Of particular concern is the fact that some locally connected business elites—overwhelmingly men—have placed themselves in strategic positions by hoarding goods in anticipation of such climate-induced shocks. Many small-scale women traders in the area, who do not have the means to engage in commodity speculation, have suffered at hands of this exploitative behaviour.

WOMEN, DEVOLUTION AND PEACE-MAKING

Devolution of political power that followed the promulgation of the 2010 Kenyan constitution has led to billions of Kenyan shillings being pumped into the Mandera economy, including investments in high-end hotels, transport infrastructure, markets, security and the development of progressive policies aimed at enhancing community participation. The devolution of power has created local autonomy and enhanced trade as the management of trade and markets is now a function of county governments. One unanticipated outcome, however, has been the extension of local political systems across borders, leading to changes in clan and cultural relationships. In some cases, this has widened existing fissures or created new ones; in others, it has reaffirmed political relationships in the border area. Enhanced cross-border interaction has fused business and political interests by increasing the stake of both cross-border trade and politics. Some politicians and political brokers have resorted to regimes of control ‘have been increasingly appropriating gatekeeping privileges by managing import licenses and tightening control of circulating commodities in the borderland’.⁴⁷

One key aspect in these complex dynamics is how conflict is anticipated and dealt with. Residents frequently mention conflict as a disruptor that sows fear and changes local patterns of life. As a *miraa* vendor explains: ‘When, for six months, children are out of school, people will only be worried about their children’s food and no one will be buying our wares. Conflicts also affect where we source our stock from. Suppliers stop bringing goods to the market.’⁴⁸

PEACE-MAKING AND PARTICIPATION

The cross-cultural, transboundary political revivals seen in recent years have brought together diverse regional actors—including sheikhs, councils of elders and politicians—who serve an important role in conflict resolution and political reconciliation, which in turn impacts cross-border trade.⁴⁹ At the same time, devolution has seen policies put in place that centre participation, offering communities the opportunity to voice their grievances while respecting their local agency, knowledge and governance structures. Despite shortcomings, this has

47 Hagmann and Stepputat, *Trade Makes States*.

48 Interview with miraa seller, Mandera, 7 January 2024, female.

49 Hassan Cameroon Media, ‘Former Lower Shabele Governor Abdikadir Sidi stole the show during Garre Reconciliation meeting’, *YouTube*, 28 December 2019. Accessed 15 July 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9f4ISM0o0I>.

improved the inclusion of minority voices in both governance and peace processes, for example enabling self-organized forums for regional women leaders drawn from Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia.⁵⁰ At the same time, the intervention of local women-led organizations has been invaluable in providing training and small amounts of capital to refugees and IDPs displaced by conflicts, helping them transition to gainful economic livelihood at various Mandera markets. As one CSO representative in Mandera tells it:

Nobody holds activities without involving us. We have cash transfer committees. We participate in decision-making through county steering group meetings. We have a good relationship with the authorities in Malka Suftu and Beled Hawo. We have empowered their women.⁵¹

The emergence of a transnational peace infrastructure led by government agencies in close collaboration with local CSOs and cultural institutions has further reinforced a positive trend towards women's empowerment through their participation in peace committees and mediation processes. In particular, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)-led Conflict Early Warning Network (CEWARN) has reinforced the role played by women (including local traders) in fostering grassroots and regional peace, making them critical actors in conflict arbitration. In this respect, women in Mandera often employ traditional and cultural approaches to restoring peace and resolving conflict. One example of this is *Abaya-Abaya*, a traditional cultural event when women visit one another, bringing gifts of perfume and praying for unmarried young women, as well as those yet to conceive. As one interviewee elaborates:

We looked for funds and brought the women together. We invited 400 women—150 from the Garre, 150 from the Murule and 100 from other communities ... At first they did not talk to one another but when they were sent to purchase things together, they were forced to speak to one another. On top of that, we brought well-respected sheikhs to the forum, and they preached and advised the women.⁵²

Such cultural moments have often spurred women into action. A wedding in Wajir, for example, became the spark for the Wajir peace process, after the women attending asked the question: 'If we can come together for a friend's wedding during this violent conflict, why can't we initiate a process of ending this madness?'⁵³ The story of the Wajir peacebuilding process bears a close resemblance to the efforts and methods of women in the Mandera triangle, including in terms of the role played by elderly women, the door-to-door campaigns, the resistance from elders,

50 Hassan Cameroon Media, 'Special Welcoming Ceremony For #GARRE women MPs from Region 5 #ETHIOPIA', *YouTube*, 8 November 2020. Accessed 20 March 2025, <https://youtu.be/VInCrcDT23s?si=u83a4vrLAJq5ds8>.

51 Interview with CSO representative, Mandera, 16 January 2024.

52 Interview with NGO founder and CEO, Mandera, 16 January 2024.

53 Nuria Abdullahi Abdi, *Forced By Fate and Driven by Faith. The True Story of the Wajir Peace Building Process*, 2023, 2.

and the importance of the market as an arena for conflict resolution. As the above interviewee sums up, ‘When women are not good with one another, the mood of the town changes.’⁵⁴

On top of this, the fact that many women have multiple clan affiliations means they can play ‘a structural role as a peace builder’, acting as a ‘conduit for dialogue between warring parties’ and exerting ‘pressure on them to keep talking.’⁵⁵ Since the early 2000s, numerous women-led organizations have been registered in Mandera. Among the most prominent of these is *Haweenka* (Mandera Women for Peace and Development), which has played an important role in post-conflict reintegration and support for women displaced from Somalia. One interviewee offered the following praise: ‘In the last war between Degodia and Murrulle, Abdia Sheikh Adan [founder and director of *Haweenka*] brought ten women from each community to say no to war. She is very active in peace efforts. Abdia Sheikh Adan would have been a governor if she was a man’.⁵⁶ The success of such women-led organizations, which work with various ethnic groups across the three borders, underscores the importance of local, participatory processes in achieving lasting peace.

In addition, peace committees involving women’s groups from all three border points have created a network that has moved beyond grassroots peace efforts, morphing into an important platform for members to share both their personal experiences and important market information. Given that some of those involved cannot read or write, WhatsApp groups with audio message capabilities have been used to enhance communication. Peace WhatsApp groups are also used to place orders for goods and commodities, or ask for business advice. A CSO official explains:

Before we established the Women for Change network, women from Malka Suftu used to send men to the market, and this is an added cost. Now, they send messages on our WhatsApp forums and the goods are delivered and they have removed the men in the middle. Our network has helped in trust building for women to give goods and clothes across the borders. Even non-local women now cross the border to Malka Suftu and Beled Hawo. It’s changing the whole Mandera community.⁵⁷

All of the above points to the centrality of Mandera’s women in maintaining the stable environment necessary for cross-border trade to continue unhindered.

54 Interview with NGO founder and CEO, Mandera, 16 January 2024

55 Hamdi Mohamed, ‘From the Margins to the Centre: Somali Women in Peacebuilding’, in *War and Peace in Somalia: National Grievances, Local Conflict and Al-Shabaab*, eds. Michael Keating and Matt Waldman, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

56 Interview with Milk Vendor, Mandera, 11 January 2024, Female.

57 Interview with CSO official, Mandera, 16 January 2024, Female.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF DEVOLUTION

While traders in Mandera's markets acknowledge that devolution has brought some benefits, they also point to corruption and misplaced priorities on the part of the county government. In particular, the necessity of engaging in "negotiated democracy" means the functioning of county government is fraught with tension. Successive county governments have made councils of elders key players in allocating lucrative county positions to different clans based on pre-election pacts. Compounding this, the use of councils of elders in legitimizing corrupt electoral politics has led to some questioning their authority as peace mediators and rangeland managers. Moreover, these mediated governments inevitably have entrenched traditional preferences and are beset by biases against women. As one CSO representative bluntly puts it:

Negotiated democracy is negotiated money, and it's only for those with money. There is not a single woman who was elected to an office in Mandera. Only nominated women and those who come from close family and clan elders are in government. The assembly doesn't work.⁵⁸

Addressing how the patriarchal biases of county government affect women in Mandera, a representative from a women-led CSO offers detailed insights:

We have very strong women activists who can bang the table [protest] but out of a vibrant network, only one was nominated to the county assembly. Many of the women who have been nominated are young and they are not aware of the status of women, the challenges and progress made over the years. ... In the assembly, they do not contribute. ... The only active woman is sidelined and young women with powerful uncles are appointed. Women are trapped between strong patronages. For example, it's not the county but civil society organizations that organize and hold International Women's Day celebrations. But the county executive committee members take over and we find ourselves sidelined at our own events. These women know how to shine. ... Some have never been to this place [the old market].⁵⁹

By contrast, Mandera's vibrant markets seem to constitute a parallel system in which spontaneous, sustained, small-scale processes ensure minimal disruption to trade, movement and the flow of goods. This not only ensures the need for peace but affords women a unique space to excel. For women in Mandera, the markets therefore offer an alternative form of freedom. As a CSO representative attests: "There are attempts by women to vie for political offices but the elders will decide. The market is more democratic. No one will stop the women there. It's a level playing field."⁶⁰ A local *miraa* vendor backs up this assertion: 'I was part of a group of women who constructed the *Miraa* Market and we each got KES 30,000 [USD 230] in

58 Interview with CSO representative, Mandera, 17 January 2024, Female.

59 Interview with representative from a women-led organisation, Mandera, 16 January 2024, Female.

60 Interview with representative from a women-led organisation, Mandera, 16 January 2024, Female.

profits. And all ethnic groups were part of the group.⁶¹

The inherent biases of negotiated democracy in Mandera means some traders avoid any form of interaction with the county government. As a *miraa* vendor explains:

We do not look for them. They do not give me anything and they don't get in my way. ... I have never sought their support or help and they haven't given me anything. You only go to an office when you have your own people [clan] in that office.⁶²

The vice chairperson of the cattle market, is also critical of the county government's efforts to help women traders:

They [county government] have not given us any support. ... This is a regional market but we have no office, no shade. Just this open field. ... The county [government] is only quick to collect revenue and when someone refuses to pay the municipal police, *Kanjo*, will arrest them immediately. The only development the county has done at this market was erecting a fence around the market and also during corona [the COVID-19 pandemic], they installed a hand wash facility.⁶³

Despite the patriarchal biases that characterize county government, efforts have been made to benefit women traders and women-owned businesses. Perhaps the biggest impact made by the county government has been in awarding contracts to women, including granting female contractors projects in the construction and building supply sectors. As is the case for land, credit and capital, however, access to such contracts is based first and foremost on ethnicity, rather than other social relations, such as religion or kinship. Regime change in county governance has also led to past beneficiaries being sidelined. In the wake of devolution especially, clan affiliation has been instrumentalized in Mandera, with ethnic groups even producing their own flags showing the different clans. Thus, despite the shared challenges they face, the region's women are often constrained by ethno-national demands.

Another area where the Mandera county government has made active efforts is organizing women into cooperative societies, including savings and credit cooperatives (SACCOs). According to a chief officer in the cooperative society, there are about 270 registered cooperatives in Mandera, some of which have up to 500 members, although most are 'Mandera based, with no cross-border dynamics to them'.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, in Mandera's Bula Power neighbourhood, a small cooperative society named the 'Mandera East Milk Sellers SACCO' stands as a prominent example of women's market responsiveness and adaptation. As one of the founders narrates:

61 Interview with *miraa* trader, Mandera, 7 January 2024, Female.

62 Interview with *miraa* trader, Mandera, 10 January 2024, Female.

63 Interview with vice chairperson of the cattle market, Mandera, 8 January 2024, Male.

64 Interview county official in the Co-operative Department, Mandera, 12 January 2024, Female.

'we were 10 at first then grew to 32 members, then we became 63, then 78 and now we are 92 members and a registered SACCO.'⁶⁵ Although the group is registered as a milk SACCO, it is engaged in more than one business: 'We have a lot of activities individually and collectively; some members sell clothes, others sell jewels from Nairobi, while others are involved in selling potatoes. As we speak, our group Secretary has taken a lorry full of scrap metals to Nairobi.'⁶⁶

65 Interview with Milk Vendor, Mandera, 11 January 2024, Female.

66 Interview with Milk Vendor, Mandera, 11 January 2024, Female.

CONCLUSION

As this report has demonstrated, the Mandera triangle region is subject to a diverse set of complex, intersecting dynamics characterized by the coexistence of ‘legally informal’ cross-border trade and an ‘informally legal’ governmental regime. Against this backdrop, women have come to dominate the small-scale cross-border trade sector, drawing on clan connections and their own resourcefulness to secure their livelihoods.

Although the indeterminate regulatory environment caused by the closure of the Kenya–Somalia border has led to informal taxation rates being adhered to by multiple actors—from rent-seeking police officers to armed groups such as al-Shabaab—the stability afforded by such arrangements rests on fragile foundations. This has been demonstrated by the inflated rates demanded in the wake of violent incidents. Through the networks created by peace committees, women have played a key role in maintaining the peace and thus ensuring cross-border trade can continue relatively unhindered, regardless of its official status. Moreover, these newly developed networks have provided a means for women traders to exchange information and diversify their business interests. As such, the contradictory dynamics at play in the Mandera triangle have provided the area’s women with often transformational economic and social opportunities.

The securitization agenda of the state, however, continues to significantly impact how trade is conducted with for example the network connections being disrupted for days without any notice being given to traders. Such interventions substantially disadvantage small scale traders, particularly for milk and *miraa* traders whose commodities are perishable and need good communication infrastructure, while operating in a precarious position.

Furthermore, the significant presence of bureaucratic players only increases chances of exploitation and rent-seeking opportunities as state officers collude. Such complex networks of government agencies favour local political brokers and business elites at the expense of small-scale traders.

Women in particular face a variety of ongoing obstacles. While devolution in Kenya has brought benefits, the tensions of maintaining a “negotiated democracy” mean women continue to be excluded from county government positions and subject to patriarchal bias in local decision-making. In this respect, ethno-national demands place severe constraints on women’s access to land, credit, capital and contracts. As such, addressing perceived corruption in county government and moving beyond ethnic/clan divides offer a prospective path towards buttressing women’s empowerment.

Looking towards the future, Kenya's stated intention of re-opening its border with Somalia has received a mixed reception, with some women concerned that attempts to formalize cross-border trade will result in their exclusion. Given the progress made by the region's women in recent years, any roll-back on their hard-won economic freedoms could have negative consequences for local livelihoods. Meanwhile, the activities and strength of al-Shabaab in the area present potential challenges to cross-border trade going forward, and will require close monitoring. Finally, Kenya's devolution process and the operational mechanics of county government should be closely reviewed with a view to ensuring women's social and economic freedoms are nurtured rather than suppressed.

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