Conference Report

Clan Conflict and Violent Extremism in the North-Eastern Counties of Kenya

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Introduction

ON 22 JANUARY 2019, RUSI’s office in Nairobi held a conference on Clan Conflict and Violent Extremism in the North-Eastern Counties of Kenya. The conference aimed to share findings of studies that had been supported by RUSI under its Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism programme (STRIVE-II), funded by the EU. The concern with exploring this specific area of research was encouraged by the emerging dynamics in the North-East region.

Since 2012, the NE region of Kenya, which borders Somalia, has suffered a number of devastating terrorist attacks.¹ Many of the most major incidents have been orchestrated by Al-Shabaab, a Somalia-based terror group which has emerged as one of the deadliest terrorist organisations in sub-Saharan Africa.² While reports of Al-Shabaab’s activities were noted prior to 2012,³ it was not until Kenya launched its military offensive in Somalia (Operation Linda Nchi) that more consistent news of the group extending its operations to Kenya’s North-East region began to emerge.⁴ Between 2017 and 2018 alone, at least 25 attacks targeting security officers, civilians and government officials were reported.⁵

In expanding its operations to Kenya’s North-East region, Al-Shabaab has co-opted the narrative of marginalisation and victimisation of the ethnic Somali population. Within such a narrative (often communicated via official communiques and in speeches), ethnic Somalis are portrayed as victims of a strategic campaign led by the Kenyan government and its Western allies to keep Somalis oppressed and poor.⁶ In particular, Al-Shabaab has made efforts to exploit what it presents as the alienation of the ethnic Somali population from mainstream Kenyan society, highlighting the treatment of ethnic Somalis by Kenyan security forces, most notably during

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5. Data compiled from the Armed Conflict Location Event Database (ACLED), Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) and Warrior Insight reports by RUSI, Nairobi. The compiled dataset is not publicly available. For further information on this, please contact the authors of this report.
Operation *Usalama Watch* when more than 4,000 ethnic Somalis were arbitrarily arrested,\(^7\) and the region’s relative economic and political underdevelopment.\(^8\)

**Figure 1:** North-East Kenya Counties of Mandera, Wajir and Garissa

Source: Google Earth, 2019.

Added to the use of a victimisation narrative, reports of Al-Shabaab exploiting existing conflicts and rivalries among clans and sub-clans in the North-East region of Kenya have also emerged.

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8. Nearly 70% of residents in North-East counties of Kenya live in poverty and have poor access to basic services. Socio-economic indicators also fall significantly below the national average; for example, the female literacy rate is 41%, well below the national average of 89%, access to safe drinking water is 57% compared to 72% in other counties. For more details, see World Bank, ‘Boosting Prosperity, Improving Equity in North and North Eastern Kenya’, 8 May 2018, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2018/05/08/boosting-prosperity-improving-equity-in-north-and-north-eastern-kenya>, accessed 6 June 2019.
For instance, the increase in political competition following the introduction of devolution\textsuperscript{9} in 2010, which in some areas took on a violent overtone, has opened up the space for groups such as AS to expand their operations and activities in the region.\textsuperscript{10} Similarly, Ngala Chome concluded that cross-border conflict spillovers due to close clan ties across the Kenya–Somalia border have provided AS with an opportunity to establish their presence in the region.\textsuperscript{11}

Despite emergent findings, robust evidence of Al-Shabaab’s involvement or opportunism in clan-based conflicts for recruitment remains limited. To address this gap in research, RUSI, in partnership with Garissa University College, supported the development of three academic papers to examine the evolving nature of clan conflicts in NE Kenya and analyse the extent to which violent extremist (VE) groups such as Al-Shabaab exploit such conflicts. The findings from these papers were then presented at the conference on Clan Conflict and Violent Extremism in the North-Eastern Counties of Kenya.

Following a qualitative approach,\textsuperscript{12} each of the papers focused on one of the three counties that constitute the North-East region. The first paper, by Dean Abdulrahman Hamo Mohamed,\textsuperscript{13} focused on the role of Al-Shabaab in inter-clan conflicts and the proximate causes and triggers for clan conflicts in Mandera County. The second paper, by Professor Stephen Rotich,\textsuperscript{14} also investigated the relationship between the drivers of clan-based conflicts and the role of Al-Shabaab, but in Garissa

\textsuperscript{9} Devolution was introduced in 2010 under the constitution as a system of decentralisation whereby the newly constituted 47 county governments would have more control over the delivery of certain key services. The county administration, consisting of executive and legislative branches, would be responsible for the delivery of agriculture, transportation and trade licences, sanitation, pre-primary education, village polytechnics, and most health facilities. At least 15% of the national budget would also now go to these county governments, with provisions for additional funds under certain circumstances. For more details, see Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques (IRIS), ‘North-Eastern Kenya: A Prospective Analysis’, December 2015, <https://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ENG-Observatoire-Prospective-Huma-NORTHEasternKenya-12-2015.pdf>, accessed 6 June 2019.


\textsuperscript{12} Qualitative research methods for the three papers included interviews and focus group discussions with respondents from the three counties.


County. Similarly, the third paper, by Professor David Karienye, explored the relationship between clan-based conflicts and the role of external actors such as Al-Shabaab in Wajir County. Professor Ahmed Osman Warfa (Vice Chancellor, Garissa University) co-authored all three research papers.

I. Conference Agenda and Discussion

The conference on Clan Conflict and Violent Extremism in the North-Eastern Counties of Kenya was held at the Rift Valley Institute in Nairobi and was attended by representatives from the Kenyan government, foreign governments, NGOs, civil society organisations (CSOs), academics, think tanks and consultancies. The conference aimed to accomplish three main goals: to share research findings on drivers of clan conflicts and the role of external actors in such conflicts; to expand the level of debate and discourse on the subject; and to produce actionable recommendations for policy and programming.

The conference was opened by Martine Zeuthen, Team Leader of the STRIVE II (Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism) programme, and was moderated by Murithi Mutiga, Deputy Project Director, Horn of Africa, International Crisis Group. Key themes discussed during the conference included drivers of clan conflicts in North-Eastern counties and the role of external actors, particularly Al-Shabaab, in clan conflicts and dynamics in the North-East region. In discussing these themes, insights and policy recommendations were also made for addressing the drivers and reducing the opportunities for Al-Shabaab to advance their interests and operations in the region. This conference report discusses these themes and lessons for policymakers and security practitioners.
II. Drivers of Clan Conflicts: Common Themes

Despite ethnic differences in terms of clan-based groupings – with Ogaden clans dominant in Garissa County, Degodia and Ajuuran groups dominant in Wajir County, and Garre and Murule groups dominant in Mandera County – important similarities were noted in the fundamental drivers of clan conflicts across the three counties.

Competition Over Scarce Natural Resources

The three papers identified competition over scarce natural resources, particularly water, pasture and land, as among the critical drivers of clan conflict in the largely livestock-dependent counties of North-East Kenya. Based on the narratives of the respondents, the presenters found that conflict over grazing land and water points was a major source of clan animosity.

In Wajir County, for example, Karienye’s research found that changes in climatic conditions, including erratic rainfall, diminished pasture lands, and depleted water supply in catchment points, have been significant contributors to clan conflicts. In the words of one key informant quoted by Karienye, ‘Climate-related factors coupled with the large numbers of animals are putting pressure on pastural land and the available water supply. This is increasing the competition over the resources among the clans during the dry spell and creating tensions which has led to conflicts over resources’.16

The presenters also pointed out that administrative borders, which aim in part to indicate claims over communal land and therefore undermine migration of pastoralists looking for water and pasture across boundaries, have also played a significant role in intensifying clan conflicts in these counties. This is because pastoralists in this region tend to move across borders as part of their traditional migratory and nomadic practices and therefore rarely curtail their movements to stated boundaries. Quoting the work of Keren Weitzberg,17 the presenters, in particular Mohamed, noted that nomadic populations of the North-East region of Kenya share a history of skirting boundaries and have often attempted to extend or rethink the borders that have hindered their mobility and divided them from their kin and pasture.

Speaking in regard to Mandera County, Mohamed argued that since clan identity dictates collective claims on land, clan animosity often worsens when massive numbers of people and

livestock move across set boundaries in search of water and pasture, particularly during dry seasons. For example, conflict between the Garre and Murule clans in 2005 over grazing land led to the death of dozens of people and displacement of others in areas of El-Wak, Wargadud and Lafey along the Kenya–Somalia border.

Similarly, Rotich noted that clan hostilities in Garissa County are often caused by fierce competition over grazing land that extends to other counties. For example, conflict between the Abdalla, who are mostly pastoralists in Ijara, Garissa County, and the Pokomo, who are largely farmers in Tana River County, was summed up as follows: ‘We cannot sit and watch our livestock die. We have to look for pastures for them. When they fight us, we defend our livestock and ourselves’.18

**Administrative and Electoral Border Issues**

Administrative and electoral boundary issues were also identified as drivers of clan conflict in all three counties. The three papers highlighted how the creation of new internal boundaries by Kenya’s independent boundaries and electoral commission (IEBC) had contributed to recent clan conflicts in the region. The presenters argued that this was because boundary demarcations broadly determine ownership of resources and ease of access to government services.

Karienye made the point in his presentation that lack of understanding and agreement about border demarcations in Wajir County had greatly contributed to clan tensions. For example, conflicts between the Degodia and Ajuran clans over Eldas and Wajir North constituency border lines were summarised as follows: ‘The cause of the clan conflict between the clans is lack of knowledge on the actual border line – Ajuran say this while Degodia say that. This confusion causes conflict, especially during elections’.19

**Political Competition**

The three papers found that the struggle for political representation following the promulgation of Kenya’s new constitution in 201020 and the introduction of a decentralised system of government wherein two of the three arms of government – the Legislature and the Executive – are devolved to the 47 Political and Administrative Counties as provided for under Article 6 and specified in the First Schedule. The primary objective of decentralisation is to devolve power, resources and representation down to the local level. To this end, various laws have been enacted by parliament to create strategies for the implementation framework and the adoption on which objectives of devolution can be achieved.

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18. Key informant in Garissa County, quoted in the presentation by Rotich, ‘Drivers of Clan Based Conflicts: A Perspective of Violent Extremism Involvement in Garissa County, Kenya’.


20. The Constitution of Kenya 2010 creates a decentralised system of government wherein two of the three arms of government – the Legislature and the Executive – are devolved to the 47 Political and Administrative Counties as provided for under Article 6 and specified in the First Schedule. The primary objective of decentralisation is to devolve power, resources and representation down to the local level. To this end, various laws have been enacted by parliament to create strategies for the implementation framework and the adoption on which objectives of devolution can be achieved.
government have deepened existing conflicts. They argued that where clientelism\textsuperscript{21} was an accepted practice such that clan leaders were expected to promote the interest of their clan group in return for electoral support, devolution had increased the benefits of political office. Consequently, political competition in this region was becoming fiercer with increasing clan animosity and violence. This had led to the displacement of minority clan groups and the influx of majority clan members from other regions, including from Ethiopia and Somalia, with the primary aim of influencing election outcomes.

In Garissa County, Rotich noted that political competition was a major source of clan animosity and hostilities since elected leaders tended to favour their clans in awarding tenders and employment opportunities.

Apart from clan-based favouritism in access to economic opportunities, the presenters also concluded that incitement and intimidation, especially during electoral campaigns, have instigated conflicts in the region. Mohamed quoted one respondent as saying: ‘There has been political provocation where some politicians openly incite their clans to evacuate opposing clans that might not vote for them and may reclaim their land back if they are allowed to graze and settle’.\textsuperscript{22}

Further, the presenters observed that although devolution was introduced in 2010 to reduce political marginalisation, expand the democratic space and promote more responsive and accountable government, it has also had the effect of intensifying clan-based competition for representation. Mohamed argued that devolution had significantly intensified local competition, particularly for gubernatorial positions, due to the associated political and economic benefits. This has led to dominant clans strategising and taking control of county affairs. This was best summarised by one of the respondents quoted by Mohamed during his presentation: ‘The devolution has widened the gaps further between communities living in Mandera. Bigger clans and their allies benefit while the minorities and marginalised are not represented in county affairs against the spirit of the constitution and further aggravate the existing inter-clan conflicts in the county’.\textsuperscript{23}


\textsuperscript{22} Key informant in Mandera County, quoted in the presentation by Mohamed, ‘External Forces as Drivers of Clan Conflicts in Mandera County, Kenya’.

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Ibid}. 
III. Drivers of Clan Conflicts: Differences

Important differences were also observed about the nature of clan conflicts, especially in Mandera and Garissa Counties compared with Wajir County.

Business Rivalry

Business rivalry over smuggling routes on the Kenya–Somalia border was identified as a key factor in fuelling inter-clan conflict, particularly in Mandera County. Mohamed found that business rivalry over contraband goods imported into Kenya through Mogadishu and Jubba regions of Southern Somalia, and Miraa trade from Kenya and Ethiopia to Somalia, have contributed to clan animosities.

Additionally, the porous nature of the Kenya–Somalia border and the limited number of Kenyan Revenue Authority (KRA) officials have led to clan hostilities over the control of smuggling routes, particularly in the town of Boru-Hache, a business hub and transit point for smuggled goods coming into Kenya through the town of El-Wak. As one Madera County respondent noted: ‘The Marehan clan are the people controlling trade in our own land. Our people have been marginalised in their own land and sometimes being fought and driven to El-Wak as refugees’. 24

Additionally, Mohamed noted that businessmen and politicians have exploited the clan animosity in the area through attacks and assassinations of business rivals from other clans in an effort to maintain monopolies and stifle competition, thereby fuelling clan hostility in the region. Drawing on the feedback from key informant interviews, Mohamed found that business rivalry coupled with the presence of Al-Shabaab in the region have forced clans to forge alliances with other clans in Somalia to protect their business interests.

Role of Radio Stations

In Mandera County, Mohamed found that local radio stations in some instances tend to be insensitive in their reporting and have exacerbated animosity among clans in the region. Mohamed noted that due to the huge following that local radio stations attract in Mandera County, politicians from warring clans sometimes tend to use radio stations as platforms to propagate fear and clan hatred, and even incite clans against each other.

24. Key informant in Mandera County, quoted in the presentation by Mohamed, ‘External Forces as Drivers of Clan Conflicts in Mandera County, Kenya’.
Proliferation of Small Arms

Small-arms proliferation was also found to be a driver of clan conflicts, particularly in Mandera and Garissa Counties. Mohamed noted that the porous nature of the Kenya–Somalia border and the booming firearms business in Hargeisa and other towns on the Kenyan–Somali border had led to the proliferation of small arms in Mandera County, and had exacerbated violence in the region. Rotich also argued that the porous Kenya–Somalia border makes it easy for some sub-clans in Garissa County to communicate with counterparts in Somalia and obtain weapons: ‘There are guns everywhere ... when there are clashes. When there is no fight, you cannot see them. The guns come from Somalia where they are readily accessible and sold in the market, like any other item’.25

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25. Key informant in Garissa County, quoted in the presentation by Rotich, ‘Drivers of Clan Based Conflicts: A Perspective of Violent Extremism Involvement in Garissa County, Kenya’.
IV. Role of Al-Shabaab in Clan Conflicts

THE THREE PRESENTERS found that Al-Shabaab has exploited existing clan conflicts and dynamics in North-Eastern counties by influencing and exacerbating clan divisions with the ultimate aim of advancing their operations and activities in Kenya. Karienye found that the promise of employment opportunities by Al-Shabaab had contributed to a significant number of youths crossing over to Somalia. However, when there were inter-clan conflicts the same youths were called upon to return and defend their clan interests.

Similarly, Mohamed argued that competition over resources, hostilities between elected officials and clan competition have enabled Al-Shabaab to entice marginalised and aggrieved minority clans in Mandera County with employment opportunities in Somalia. He also noted that clans in Mandera County, particularly those with ties across the Kenya–Somalia border, tend to procure Al-Shabaab’s protection services, including provision of guns during clan violence. This was best summarised as follows: ‘Some members of the clan negotiate and pay [Al-Shabaab] in order to support them and provide guns during conflicts’.\textsuperscript{26}

The presenters also argued that a hard security approach by Kenya’s security actors on handling clan conflicts, the perception of historical injustices, and mistrust between law enforcement and the ethnic Somali community had enabled Al-Shabaab to use a narrative of victimisation to gain support for their operations in the region. According to respondents interviewed in the study, communities in Mandera County perceived security agents in the area to be repressive. One of them noted: ‘The Kenyan government brought security forces in the name of conducting security operations against Al-Shabaab, but they have instead assaulted and forced our men to flee to the neighbouring countries of Somalia and Ethiopia’.\textsuperscript{27}

The presenters also observed that endeavours by businesses and politicians to protect their interests and safeguard smuggling routes at the Kenya–Somalia border have provided an enabling platform for Al-Shabaab to extend their operations in the region. More specifically, Mohamed argued that businesses in Mandera County were inclined to form alliances with Al-Shabaab. In return for facilitating youth recruitment, Al-Shabaab supplied businesses with arms, helped them in securing their business interests, and facilitated the movement of smuggled goods across the border. Quoting a respondent in Mandera County, Mohamed noted how ‘[Al-Shabaab] easily crosses over to Mandera through a porous border with these contraband...’

\textsuperscript{26.} Key informant in Mandera County, quoted in the presentation by Mohamed, ‘External Forces as Drivers of Clan Conflicts in Mandera County, Kenya’.

\textsuperscript{27.} Ibid.
goods by corrupting Kenyan and Ethiopian forces and KRA officials at the border trade route areas such as El-Wak, Rhamu and Bula Hawa’.
V. Conclusions and Recommendations

THE CONFERENCE ON Clan Conflict and Violent Extremism in Counties in North-Eastern Kenya provided key perspectives on how Al-Shabaab is taking advantage of existing conflict dynamics and enmeshing itself in inter- and intra-clan conflicts. While the conference did share some important insights on emerging research in the region, it also highlighted the need for more rigorous research and policy action to address some of the changing dynamics. In particular, there is a need for both civil society actors and government officials to undertake initiatives to resolve some of the root causes of clan conflict as well as to create more robust mechanisms for curtailing the influence and role of Al-Shabaab in such conflicts.

These emerging findings underscore the need to address the political and resource-based nature of clan conflicts to respond to Al-Shabaab’s exploitation of clan conflicts by pitting clans against each other, supplying weapons and/or fighters, and fuelling clan and ethnic grievances. To address these concerns, the following sets of recommendations emerged from the discussions. These emerged from the discussion with conference participants following the presentation of the three research papers. Some of the recommendations were directed at non-governmental actors such as NGOs, civil society organisations and think tanks, while others were addressed to county and national governments.

Recommendations

Non-Governmental Actors

- **Resolving underlying drivers of clan conflicts.** There is a need to build and strengthen platforms for clan-level dialogue for conflict resolution. Currently, civil society organisations and NGOs have sought to address longstanding concerns, especially regarding natural resource sharing and border disputes. These platforms need to be strengthened to foster equitable distribution of resources and employment opportunities across all clans and thereby reduce cases of marginalisation and promote clan cohesiveness. Additionally, such platforms also need to contend with how external actors such as Al-Shabaab may be mediating such conflicts and engage with the positions that clans need to take collectively to mitigate the risk of such involvement.

- **Strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations and Community Peace Committees to promote the relationship between security agents and the community.** There is a need to strengthen the capacity of civil society organisations and Community Peace Committees to bolster their role in mitigating clan conflicts and to enhance cooperation and trust between security agents and the local community. In particular, strengthened civil society organisations and Community Peace Committees
would promote trust between security agents and the community through improved communication, improved engagement in peace talks and reconciliation initiatives among warring clans, and enhanced early-warning systems and response framework.

- **Advancing the evidence base on the nature of clan conflicts in the North-East region and how violent extremist groups exploit existing conflicts.** While the three research papers illuminated the drivers of clan conflicts and how violent extremist groups exploited and navigated these conflicts, there is very limited research emerging from the region. National and international research organisations need to conduct more locally specific research on the evolving nature of clan dynamics and the role of external actors such as Al-Shabaab. One key area of concern that was highlighted was investigating the validity of some of the popular claims and assertions regarding the role of migration in influencing clan dynamics and Al-Shabaab’s recruitment patterns. Additionally, participants also highlighted the need for more research on the relationship between business interests and Al-Shabaab’s recruitment patterns.

Governments

- **Counties need to include provisions for managing inter-clan conflicts as part of their county action plans.** Counties in the North-East region of Kenya should develop and implement County Action Plans, identifying interventions to address inter- and intra-clan conflicts as well as ways of countering violent extremism. However, in identifying interventions, County Action Plans should aim to involve local communities and to build their capacity for peace through community-based conflict resolution processes based on trust-building, addressing the impediments to peace, focusing on resilience factors and adopting a conflict transformation approach.

- **Revising administrative and election boundaries with the involvement of all clans from the affected area.** Given confusion over border lines, the Kenyan government, through the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission, should review the contested boundaries in consideration of the prevailing clan dynamics in the region. While this is likely to be a politically complex process, especially under the new boundary review exercise, the participants suggested that it was important that during elections, electoral laws were adhered to and the prosecution and sentencing of election crimes and offences was strengthened at the point of arrest.

- **Developing mechanisms for cross-border security.** Given the proliferation of small arms and the smuggling of goods owing to the porous nature of the Kenya–Somalia border, border security should be bolstered to disrupt the free movement of goods for Al-Shabaab. Further, security officers from local communities and Kenya Police Reservists should have greater involvement in border security. Such strategies have been found to be effective in improving early-warning systems and contributing to the general security situation in the counties.

- **County governments should do more to build resilience.** This could include building community resilience to environmental shocks, such as through specific programmes and initiatives that could include the establishment of pastoral and agro-pastoral cooperative societies. Additionally, given the nature of youth-based recruitment, provisions
should also be made for youth-focused employment programmes. This would include programmes directed at empowering and equipping youth with skills and capacities for formal employment or providing grants to youth to set up their own businesses.
About the Authors

Gayatri Sahgal is a Research Manager with RUSI’s East Africa office and has worked in South Asia, North America and the Horn of Africa region – Kenya and Somalia. Gayatri has extensive experience in managing and leading research projects in the fields of countering violent extremism, governance, state-building and public service delivery. Currently, she is leading the Monitoring and Evaluation and Research component of EU’s Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE – II) project in East Africa.

Timothy Kimaiyo has served as Project Assistant at RUSI’s Nairobi office since August 2018. Prior to joining RUSI Nairobi, Timothy worked for Busara Center for Behavioral Economics as a Research Analyst. Timothy has extensive skills in quantitative and qualitative research, econometrics, and data management and analysis. He holds an MA in Economics and a Bachelor of Economics (First Class Honors), both from the University of Nairobi, Kenya.

Abdulrahman Hamo Mohamed has been working for a period of more than 20 years within the education sector in Kenya in different capacities. He is currently Acting Registrar of Research, Innovation and Linkage at Garissa University. Prior to this he was the Dean of Students in charge of student welfare, also at Garissa University. Within this role, Mohamed played a lead role in the review and establishment of university statutes and policies. Mohamed is currently pursuing his Doctorate of Philosophy in Education from Mount Kenya University. Mohamed holds a Bachelor of Education Science from Kenyatta University, Kenya.

Stephen Rotich is currently Registrar (Academics and Students Affairs) at Garissa University. A graduate of Moi University (Doctor of Philosophy in Education Management, 2014 and Master of Philosophy in Education Administration, 2010), Rotich has more than 27 years of teaching experience: seven years of teaching in university; two years in teachers’ training college and 18 years in high school. Prior to joining Garissa University, Rotich was the principal of a high school and a trainer of head teachers.

David Karienye is a full-time lecturer at Garissa University in the Department of Arts and Social Sciences with over eight years of teaching experience and research. He has won several research grants and conducted research on different themes in Kenya and globally. He is currently pursuing a PhD at Karatina University Kenya. In 2016 David developed a course concept for SLE Graduate School on Climate Change Adaptation for the Centre for Rural Development (SLE) Humboldt Universität zu Berlin Germany. His research interests include climate change adaptations, violent extremism and clan dynamics.

Ahmed Osman Warfa is Vice Chancellor of Garissa University. Professor Warfa completed his PhD in Curriculum Instruction from Ohio University, US. Professor Warfa has over 30 years of experience as a lecturer and in university management. His areas of expertise include political devolution, conflict transformation, and curriculum and pedagogical development.