



NCIC-KASH Consortium Restores Peace between Two Warring Communities

A habitual land boundary dispute between two neighbouring communities, Luhya and Nandi, residing along the Nandi escarpment in the border of Kakamega North and Nandi North sub-county resurfaced into fresh tribal conflicts in May 2020. The dispute – over 13.7 acres escarpment land – resulted in the demise of one person, injuries of five people, and theft of two bulls by someone believed to have come from Ikoli village in Kakamega. This saw youths from Tabolwa-Kanin village in Nandi mobilize themselves to pursue the stolen cows; which resulted in a confrontation between the two communities. The conflict brought everything to a standstill, along with destruction of property and living on the edge of anxiety.

“Nobody could cross over to buy or sell their farm products because of the fighting. Consequently, hunger struck the two communities,” Elder Clement Rotich who has held several leadership positions in Tabolwa’s Nandi community lamented the border situation after May’s conflict.

“People would not go to their farms without feeling afraid or getting attacked. So, they were not going as frequently as they were to,” Mama Margaret Shitonga, a women leader and member of Kakamega-Nandi Cross-Border Peace Committee corroborated.

Various stakeholders, including government, church leaders, and elites from both communities made efforts to de-escalate the issue. The Kakamega-Nandi Cross-Border Peace Committee – formed in 2015, following interventions by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC), to assist in managing 2014 skirmishes that swept the area and prompted residents of Kuvasali village in Kakamega North to flee their homes – held numerous local-level dialogues to return peace between the conflicting communities. The Office of the County Commissioners of the two counties, likewise, held meetings with local administrators and village elders and directed them to reinstate calm in their jurisdictions. Despite the peace efforts, however, the cross-border communities continued living with their hearts in their hands, vowing not to cross over to buy milk or feed their cows. Then, the NCIC-KASH Consortium – a partnership between the NCIC and four non-governmental organizations (*Keeping Alive Societies’ Hope (KASH)*, *Champions of Peace (CoP)*, *Institute for Civic Education and Development in Africa (ICEDA)*, and *Kenya Female Advisory Organization (KEFEADO)*) – with support from USAID, intervened.

“They (NCIC-KASH Consortium) began by holding Peace and Security Stakeholders’ Seminars in Kapsabet and Kakamega towns, which leaders from the two communities attended quite alright,” Richard Shiyonga, Chairman, Kakamega-Nandi Cross-Border Peace Committee, recalled. “They gave us lectures, showed us how to address our differences through dialogues, and live peacefully.”

Nandi County Governor, H.E. Stephen Sang, was pleased to welcome NCIC Commissioners (*Eng. Phillip Okundi, Sam Kona, and Hon. Dorcas Kedogo*), KASH Consortium executive directors (*Thomas Abol – KASH, Elly Opondo – CoP, and Kenneth Anusu – ICEDA*), and FHI-360 team to Nandi County when they paid him a courtesy visit at the county’s headquarters in Kapsabet at the onset of the project.

“I believe you are going to find out those underlying issues that have kept the Nandi-Kakamega border communities in clashes for a long time,” Sang said. “And, let’s bring together all relevant stakeholders to address these issues and ensure sustained peace in Tabolwa.”

John Ng’eny, a youth leader and member of the cross-border peace committee, feeling delighted during a Tabolwa Youth Dialogue Forum held in August 2020 to allow area youth to discuss potential threats to their peace and provide homegrown solutions, said, “This is the first time USAID has come to Tabolwa; which elevates our optimism to enjoy sustainable peace in this area.”



Community members deliberate on long lasting solutions s to conflict at the border of Nandi and Kakamega

Women and girls, just like the youth, were organized for separate dialogue forums – away from watchful eyes and snooping ears – to deliberate on their roles in both conflicts and peacebuilding incidences.

“For a long time, we (women) have been ignored in discussions around matters related to conflict or peacebuilding. We have not been accorded the space to voice our concerns, yet, we bear the most brunt when conflicts occur,” Basilisa Jepkorir, women leader and mobilizer from Tabolwa-Kanin village in Nandi asserted during a women’s dialogue forum held at Tabolwa Secondary School. “How else will they (male counterparts) know how sad we get when they leave us with all responsibilities as they fight?”



Women embrace after a peace dialogue forum

“During such clashes, women get raped and are intimidated from speaking out,” a female participant shared during a similar forum held at Friends Church, Kuvasali. “Without such forums, we fear a rise in mental health concerns among women from this village while their rapists go scot-free!”

S.K. Makhanu, Deputy County Commissioner, Nandi North Sub-County, during an intra-community dialogue forum held in Tabolwa recalled, “The conflict between the two communities was a very distressful situation. For a long time, the road connecting the two communities was deserted.”

“Peacebuilding is a process,” said Thomas Abol during a second inter-community dialogue forum that saw Nandi community members and leaders – for the first time in a long while – descend the escarpment to discuss long-lasting solutions to cross-border conflicts with their Kakamega counterparts. “We are rolling down an early warning, early response (EWER) mechanism to help you track conflict indicators, report these potential threats to peace on time, and respond efficiently to curb possible flare-ups.”

“The process culminated into a truce. Right from the forum, both communities resolved to embrace peace,” Eng. Phillip Okundi reported to Governor Sang during a Mid-Project Feedback Forum held on September 3rd, 2020, at Acacia Hotel in Kisumu; an activity attended by his Kisumu counterpart, H.E. Anyang’ Nyong’o. “The two communities agreed that they would not attack each other again and that they would embrace dialogue whenever issues of concern arise.”

While NCIC-KASH Consortium continues to support the two communities to adopt and utilize the EWER mechanism, the ceasefire has brought relief as it restored some semblance of peace in both communities.

“People can now sleep with their eyes closed,” Lwimboli Malongo, a resident of Kuvasali attested to the relative peace being enjoyed along the border after the inter-community dialogue forum during which the conflicting parties embraced one another and shared meals and drinks.

“I am sure we (the youth) can build on this peace,” Solomon Waiti, a youth leader from Ikoli said when asked about a way forward for the youth residing along the Nandi escarpment. “As youths, we will continue to come together to address our differences amicably. We cannot wait to commemorate the International Day of Peace, 2020, with youths from Nandi.”

Irene Cheruto, a resident of Tabolwa, emphasized that peace was needed in the two communities “so that our socio-economic activities can return to what it was before the crisis”.

The community residing along the Kakamega-Nandi border expressed a belief that the work of the NCIC-KASH Consortium will significantly reduce incidents of conflict in the region. Chair, Richard Shiyonga requested that “the intervention should go beyond six (6) weeks. In fact, by continuing this work in the grassroots, issues like fighting, destruction of property, and killing will be wiped out”. The cross-border peace committee chairman went on to encourage the project to “empower peace committee members to play more role towards broader peacebuilding in the region by contributing conflict data to the EWER Mechanism” and “better serve their communities”.

He also urged the cross- border peace committee members to provide accurate information to the EWER Mechanism and “help us map conflicts and promote peacebuilding in our region”.

Asked about the peacebuilding process during the mid-project review meeting in Kisumu, Sam Kona, NCIC Commissioner, told the media, “We consulted and engaged various stakeholders, had dialogues peacebuilding and conflict management, and brought everybody on board to accept a common voice.”