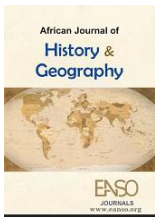
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Original Article

The Effect of the Porous Kenya-Somalia Border on Education in Garissa County

Mohamed Ali Heibe[1], Dr. Patrick K. Kiragu, PhD[2] & Dr. Ruth N. Njoroge, PhD[1]*

[1] Mount Kenya University, P. O. Box 342-01000, Thika, Kenya.
[2] Murang'a University of Technology, P. O. Box 75-10200, Murang'a, Kenya.
[*] Author's ORCID ID; https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5548-190X; Email: karim259karimzo@gmail.com

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Porous Border, Education, Insecurity, Garissa County, Kenya–Somalia Border.

ABSTRACT

Globally, border regions face unique developmental challenges, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected environments. These regions are vulnerable to security threats, governance challenges, and the provision of basic services, including education. In most areas of the world, open borders are associated with cross-border criminality, migration of armed groups, smuggling, and population displacement, all bear adverse implications on public service delivery and community stability. In East Africa, the Kenya-Somalia border has long been described as porous and insecure, marked by frequent insurgent activity, refugee flows, and informal economic exchange. The porous Kenya–Somalia border has played a central role in enabling cross-border insecurity, which continues to undermine education in Garissa County. Extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab exploit the unmonitored and poorly secured border to infiltrate the region, conduct attacks, and create widespread fear among educators, students, and parents. A tragic example is the 2015 Garissa University attack, which triggered a mass exodus of non-local teachers and severely disrupted learning across the county. This study employed a qualitative research design to assess the impact of the porous Kenya–Somalia border on education in Garissa County. The study targeted key stakeholders relevant to the effect of the porous Kenya–Somalia border on education in Garissa County. Data was collected from three Deputy County Commissioners (DCCs) and twelve chiefs, purposively selected from the border sub-counties of Dadaab, Fafi, and Hulugho due to their direct involvement in security and administrative matters. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with DCCs and chiefs to gain qualitative insights into security challenges affecting education. The collected data underwent thematic qualitative analysis. Secondary literature was used to complement the primary data. The triangulation of interviews, focused group discussions (FGDs), and secondary sources enhanced the credibility and depth of the findings. Garissa County, especially the Dadaab area, has experienced continuous refugee inflows due to the unstable conditions in Somalia. These movements have placed a heavy burden on the local education system. Teachers and local leaders cited severe overcrowding in classrooms, sometimes exceeding 80 pupils per teacher, and noted shortages in textbooks and learning materials. One education officer remarked that schools lack the infrastructure and human resources to accommodate both refugee and host community children effectively. The porous

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Kenya-Somalia border has played a central role in undermining education in Garissa County. Cross-border insecurity has led to school attacks, teacher withdrawal, and student dropouts. These challenges, compounded by policy gaps and under-resourced emergency response systems, have fostered environments where children, especially girls, struggle to access and complete basic education. The Kenyan government, in collaboration with local leaders and regional security agencies, should enhance security along the Kenya-Somalia border. This includes deploying more well-trained and community-sensitive security personnel in border schools and education offices.

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INTRODUCTION

Globally, border regions are often affected by unique developmental challenges, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected environments. These regions are prone to security threats, governance issues, and the provision of basic services such as education. In most areas of the world, open borders have been associated with cross-border criminality, migration of armed groups, smuggling, and population displacement, all bear adverse implications on public service delivery and community stability (Makinda & Okumu, 2021). Education, being one of the pillars of sustainable development, is among the most susceptible sectors to the instability that arises from uncontrolled border activities.

In the United States, border security has been a controversial issue, particularly along the U.S.-Mexico border. Indeed, there are a lot of social and economic inequalities in the border towns affecting the education system. Border schools face various challenges that include pressures because of overcrowding, language issues, and even the transience of the students connected with the migrating populations. As an example, schools in Arizona and southern Texas shared that it is a problem to accommodate migrant children who cross the border without or with their parents, as they need extra assistance to be integrated into the education system (Gandara & Ee, 2021). Whereas the United States possesses a more developed infrastructure and resources, persistent challenges in border education systems. This highlights how porous borders can strain local educational services even in high-income countries.

Similarly, in Nigeria, border insecurity has severely affected education in its northern regions, especially in states bordering Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. The Boko Haram insurgency, which has operated across Nigeria's porous borders, has directly targeted schools, resulting in abductions, school closures, and the displacement of students and teachers. The Chibok schoolgirls' abduction in 2014 remains one of the most infamous examples of how border insecurity can devastate education systems (Akinola, 2022). These challenges have contributed to low school enrollment and literacy rates in northeastern

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Nigeria, as fear and instability continue to disrupt learning environments.

In East Africa, the Kenya-Somalia border has long been described as porous and insecure, marked by frequent insurgent activity, refugee flows, and informal economic exchange. The continued instability in Somalia has fueled the cross-border movement of people and goods, often outside formal control, which has significantly impacted Kenya's border counties, particularly Garissa. As a result, regions near this border have experienced security threats, including attacks by Al-Shabaab, an extremist group that has been active along the border region since the early 2000s (Botha, 2020). These security threats often target educational institutions, teachers, and students, thereby disrupting learning and instilling fear among residents.

Garissa County is among the areas most affected by the spillover effects of insecurity from Somalia. Despite interventions aimed at improving access to education, school enrollment and retention rates in Garissa remain below national averages. One major factor is the porous border, which has made the country susceptible to violent extremism and population displacement. Schools in areas such as Dadaab, Hulugho, and Liboi have frequently closed due to insecurity or teacher shortages, largely driven by fear of militant attacks (Karanja & Mwaura, 2022). Although the Kenyan government has tried to mitigate cross-border threats through increased military presence, a border wall, and community policing, these measures have yielded limited results. The continued porosity of the Kenya-Somalia border underscores the need for a targeted evaluation of its effects on education in Garissa County.

Statement of the Problem

The porous Kenya–Somalia border has played a central role in enabling cross-border insecurity, which continues to undermine education in Garissa County. Extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab exploit the unmonitored and poorly secured border to infiltrate the region, conduct attacks, and create widespread fear among educators, students, and parents. A tragic example is the 2015 Garissa University attack, which triggered a mass exodus of non-local teachers and severely disrupted learning across the county (Karanja & Mwaura, 2022). Since then, teacher shortages, declining enrollment, frequent school closures, and poor academic performance have persisted, driven by the insecurity facilitated through the unregulated border. While previous research has explored general insecurity in northeastern Kenya, limited attention has been paid to how the porous nature of the Kenya–Somalia border directly contributes to the instability affecting educational access, quality, and sustainability in Garissa. This study seeks to fill that critical gap by evaluating the specific effects of the porous border on the education system in the region.

Research Hypothesis

H0: To evaluate the effect of the porous Kenya-Somalia border on education in Garissa County.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Social Disorganisation Theory

Social Disorganisation Theory, originally formulated by Shaw and McKay in the early 20th century, explores how social instability and disruptions, such as poverty, migration, and urbanisation, can weaken community structures and lead to crime and disorder (Shaw & McKay, 1942). The theory emphasises that when social institutions, including education systems, fail to function cohesively due to external shocks such as insecurity, the community experiences a breakdown in social control, resulting in disorganisation and instability.

In Garissa County, the porous Kenya–Somalia border has enabled cross-border incursions by extremist groups, illegal arms trade, and refugee inflows, creating a fragile and volatile learning environment. This insecurity has led to repeated school closures, disrupted academic calendars, and the withdrawal of non-local teachers due to safety concerns. As a result, communities have

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lost trust in educational institutions, contributing to high dropout rates, especially among girls. The breakdown of social order has left schools unable to function as agents of stability and development (Orodho, 2014).

The relevance of Social Disorganisation Theory to this study lies in its ability to contextualise how persistent insecurity along the Kenya–Somalia border structurally undermines education. Similar to findings from conflict zones in Somalia and Ethiopia, where instability has disrupted learning access and quality (Akar, 2018; Abbink, 2020), Garissa faces compounded educational challenges. Displacement of learners, teacher shortages, and a rise in youth radicalisation mirror patterns observed in disorganised communities globally (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Applying this theory emphasises the need for conflict-sensitive education policies, enhanced community engagement, and targeted interventions that restore institutional trust and reinforce schools as pillars of social cohesion.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to evaluate the effect of the porous Kenya–Somalia border on education in Garissa County. The design was chosen as it provided a comprehensive understanding of the research problem through an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives. The study examined the effect of the porous Kenya–Somalia border on disrupted learning, displaced teachers and students, and affected overall school performance.

Target Population

The study targeted key stakeholders relevant to the effect of the porous Kenya–Somalia border on education in Garissa County. These included seven (7) Deputy County Commissioners (DCCs) and 82 location chiefs, given their roles in overseeing security and local administration in border-affected areas. Household heads across the 141,394 households in the county were also involved in providing community-level insights on how border insecurity affects access to education (KNBS, 2019).

Sample Size Determination

Data were collected from three Deputy County Commissioners (DCCs) and twelve chiefs, purposively selected from the border sub-counties of Dadaab, Fafi, and Hulugho due to their direct involvement in security and administrative matters. Additionally, five focus group discussions (FGDs), each comprising 8 to 12 household heads, were conducted across the same sub-counties to gather community perspectives on how the porous Kenya–Somalia border affects education. The use of purposive sampling ensured that information-rich respondents with relevant experiences were included. This approach aligns with recommendations by Krueger & Casey (2015) and Guest *et al*. (2017) on FGD size and saturation.

Data Collection Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with DCCs and chiefs to gain qualitative insights into security challenges affecting education. Additionally, FGDs were held with household heads to gather diverse perspectives. Each FGD consisted of 8–12 participants. A desktop review was conducted to analyse government reports, academic literature, and historical records related to insecurity and education in Garissa County.

Data Analysis Procedures

The collected data underwent thematic qualitative analysis. Secondary data from reports and literature were reviewed to complement the primary data. The triangulation of interviews, FGDs, and secondary sources enhanced the credibility and depth of the findings.

RESULTS

The porous Kenya-Somalia border has influenced education in Garissa County. The region’s proximity to Somalia and the porous nature of the border have facilitated the movement of armed groups, illegal arms, and refugees, intensifying insecurity and disrupting the education system.

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Cross-Border Insecurity and School Attacks

A dominant theme across the interviews was the effect of cross-border insecurity on school safety and operations. Respondents from Hulugho sub-county recounted incidents where schools were shut down due to Al-Shabaab threats or attacks. One chief noted that in 2015, three schools were closed following a nearby attack, highlighting how even perceived threats triggered school closures. A Deputy County Commissioner emphasised that learning often halts during such periods, as both teachers and parents fear for their safety.

These security threats have not only led to intermittent school closures but also contributed to the long-term withdrawal of teachers and rising absenteeism among learners. Many children in the affected communities have developed chronic anxiety, which undermines their willingness to attend school. Kenya's Ministry of Education (2020) attributes school desertion and the withdrawal of non-local teachers in northern Kenya to the persistent threat of violence.

These findings are reinforced by Mohamed & Ochieng (2021), who link educational breakdown in border regions to the activities of armed groups like Al-Shabaab. The disruption is both physical destruction of infrastructure and psychological trauma, as learners and teachers suffer trauma. UNESCO (2022) notes that the cumulative effects of this violence entrench cycles of educational exclusion, particularly in marginalised communities where resilience mechanisms are limited.

Refugee Influx and Strained Educational Resources

Garissa County, especially the Dadaab area, has experienced continuous refugee inflows due to the unstable conditions in Somalia. These movements have placed a heavy burden on the local education system. Teachers and local leaders cited severe overcrowding in classrooms, sometimes exceeding 80 pupils per teacher, and noted shortages in textbooks and learning materials. One education officer remarked that schools lack the infrastructure and human resources to accommodate both refugee and host community children effectively.

Parents expressed concerns that while children attend school, they gain little due to overstretched teachers. Abuya *et al*. (2020) found that large class sizes, particularly in marginalised regions, compromise instructional quality and disproportionately impact vulnerable learners, including girls and children from low-income families.

UNHCR (2021) confirms that Dadaab's refugee population has overwhelmed school infrastructure, necessitating double-shift systems and the use of temporary learning spaces. These measures, though helpful in the short term, have lowered education quality and undermined inclusive learning outcomes. The Republic of Kenya (2020) acknowledges that achieving education equity under such strained conditions is an ongoing challenge.

Teacher Withdrawal and Staffing Challenges

Teacher flight, especially among non-local staff, emerged as a significant issue in the region's education system. Officials from Fafi and Hulugho reported that many teachers posted to border schools either seek immediate transfers or fail to report entirely. Chiefs confirmed that threats or rumours of attacks often result in the mass departure of teaching staff. One father in Hulugho noted that his children had never had a stable teacher for over three years, owing to continuous insecurity-related withdrawals.

This high attrition disrupts curriculum delivery and contributes to poor academic performance. Furthermore, the absence of stable, trained educators discourages parents and demoralises learners. Ong'ayo (2020) stresses the role of teacher consistency in achieving positive educational outcomes. Where teachers are absent or frequently replaced, learning stagnates.

The Teachers Service Commission (TSC, 2020) documented over 2,000 teacher transfer requests from Garissa, Mandera, and Wajir between 2015

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and 2020, underscoring the regional scale of this issue. Notably, the 2015 Garissa University attack heightened fear among non-local staff, with Human Rights Watch (2021) reporting a subsequent surge in staff exits from northeastern counties.

Displacement and Interrupted Schooling

Another recurring consequence of cross-border violence is forced displacement, which has severely disrupted schooling in Garissa's border communities. A Deputy County Commissioner recalled how, in 2013, over 200 families fled Hulugho following border skirmishes, leading to mass school dropouts. Chiefs in Dadaab also confirmed displacement as a regular phenomenon, especially during periods of heightened insecurity.

Focus group participants, particularly mothers, described how their children's education was interrupted multiple times in a single year as they fled threats and sought basic shelter and food. Girls were reported to be disproportionately affected. Many never return to school after displacement, falling into early marriage or domestic labour.

UNICEF (2021) observed that displacement in northern Kenya contributes significantly to dropout rates, especially among girls. The National Drought Management Authority (NDMA, 2020) reported that over 15,000 children in Garissa County were unable to attend school in 2019 due to displacement linked to violence and drought.

Displacement also brings emotional stress, undermining concentration, school performance, and long-term educational aspirations. According to Wambua & Njuguna (2021), psychological trauma and household instability caused by repeated displacement seriously hamper children's ability to thrive in school settings.

Youth Radicalisation and the Role of Education

The study also documented increasing concerns about youth radicalisation, particularly among idle adolescents in insecure, underserved regions. Chiefs and teachers from Fafi and Dadaab described how youth who drop out of school, or never attend, are more likely to be influenced by extremist ideologies. A chief lamented losing several boys to radical groups, attributing their vulnerability to idleness and disillusionment.

Although schools have the potential to serve as bastions against radicalisation, stakeholders emphasised that their ability to do so is undermined by insecurity, under-resourcing, and limited extracurricular programs. Without facilities such as sports grounds, libraries, or life-skills training, young people lack constructive avenues for personal development and identity formation.

The National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC, 2021) classifies northeastern Kenya as high-risk for youth radicalisation, noting that poverty, marginalisation, and weak education systems create fertile ground for recruitment. Khalil & Onyango (2022) found that disenchanted youth in Garissa and Wajir are particularly susceptible to Al-Shabaab recruitment when educational institutions fail to offer a pathway to empowerment.

Thus, education in Garissa must be reframed not only as an academic tool but also as a counter-radicalisation strategy. Life skills programs, mentorship, peace education, and targeted teacher training are essential to preventing extremist influence among vulnerable youth populations.

Policy Gaps and Emergency Response Failures

Participants consistently criticised the government's reactive and ad hoc approach to managing education in border conflict zones. Chiefs noted that temporary security deployments or mobile learning initiatives are often late, short-lived, or ineffective. A Deputy County Commissioner in Fafi called for a proactive border education contingency plan, noting the absence of strategic planning for crisis-affected schools.

Household heads recommended various long-term interventions, including the construction of

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fortified schools, the recruitment of local teachers who are more resilient to insecurity, the integration of psychosocial support in school systems, and better coordination among education, security, and disaster agencies. One chief summarised that unless education is treated as a security priority, we'll keep losing our children to fear and ignorance.

The Ministry of Education's Education Sector Disaster Management Policy (2021) acknowledges these gaps, noting that emergency responses lack coordination and long-term planning. UNESCO (2022) argues that education in emergencies must include pre-emptive strategies, such as early warning systems, conflict-sensitive curriculum, and investment in resilient infrastructure. Without integrating education into national security and disaster response frameworks, fragile countries like Garissa will remain in a perpetual state of crisis.

CONCLUSION

The porous Kenya-Somalia border has played a central role in undermining education in Garissa County. Cross-border insecurity has led to school attacks, teacher withdrawal, and student dropouts. Refugee influxes have overstretched already limited resources, while displacement due to violence continues to interrupt learning. These challenges, compounded by policy gaps and under-resourced emergency response systems, have fostered environments where children, especially girls, struggle to access and complete basic education.

Moreover, the inability of schools to provide consistent, quality education has left youth vulnerable to radicalisation, further destabilising the region. Addressing these issues requires a multi-sectoral response that integrates education into security planning, recruits and retains local teachers, and provides psychosocial and life-skills support to learners.

Ultimately, securing education in border regions like Garissa is not only a matter of developmental policy but also of national security. Ensuring that children can learn safely, consistently, and meaningfully in these areas is crucial to breaking the cycles of violence, poverty, and marginalisation that continue to afflict northeastern Kenya.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Kenyan government, in collaboration with local leaders and regional security agencies, should enhance security along the Kenya-Somalia border. This includes deploying more well-trained and community-sensitive security personnel in border schools and education offices. Establishing secure zones around schools, supported by regular patrols and early warning systems, would restore confidence among teachers, learners, and parents. These measures are essential for reducing teacher flight, improving school attendance, and preventing frequent school closures due to insecurity.

To reduce dependency on non-local teachers who are more likely to leave due to insecurity, the Teachers Service Commission (TSC) should prioritise the recruitment, training, and deployment of teachers from within Garissa County. Local teachers are more likely to remain in their posts during periods of insecurity due to their familiarity with the region and personal ties. Additionally, providing hardship allowances, psychosocial support, and professional development opportunities can enhance the morale and retention of teaching staff in insecure areas.

The Ministry of Education should operationalise the Education Sector Disaster Management Policy by developing localised education contingency plans tailored for border counties like Garissa. These plans should include mobile schools, remote learning strategies, temporary learning spaces, and learner-tracking systems to ensure minimal disruption during periods of insecurity or displacement. Integrating technology and radio education platforms can also facilitate learning continuity during emergencies.

Given the chronic overcrowding in schools around Dadaab refugee camps, the government and international partners such as UNHCR and

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UNICEF should invest in building more classrooms, training additional teachers, and supplying adequate teaching and learning materials. Double-shift systems and community-based education models should be institutionalised to cater to both refugee and host community children without compromising quality or inclusivity.

Displacement, insecurity, and violence have inflicted psychological trauma on many learners in Garissa County. To address this, schools must integrate psychosocial support services into their structures. This includes training teachers in basic counselling skills, recruiting professional counsellors, and creating safe spaces for learners to express and manage their emotions. Such initiatives are especially vital for displaced children and those at risk of dropping out.

To prevent youth radicalisation, particularly among out-of-school adolescents, the education sector should collaborate with the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC), religious leaders, and civil society organisations to implement school-based peace education and life skills programs. Schools should serve not just as academic centres but also as platforms for civic engagement, identity formation, and counter-extremism education. Engaging youth in extracurricular activities such as sports, debates, and peer mentoring can offer alternatives to extremist influence.

Education in border regions is deeply interlinked with security, humanitarian aid, and social protection. The government should enhance coordination among relevant ministries (Education, Interior, Devolution, and Health), as well as non-state actors, to deliver a holistic response. Joint planning and resource sharing can reduce duplication, enhance impact, and ensure that education responses are integrated into broader development and security frameworks.

Lastly, community participation is crucial in sustaining education in conflict-prone areas. Chiefs, parents, school boards, and local youth groups should be actively involved in school governance, security monitoring, and education promotion. Empowering communities through sensitisation campaigns and participatory decision-making builds resilience and ensures that local priorities are reflected in educational interventions.

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