

# MEDIATING COMPLEX COMMUNITY CONFLICTS IN AFRICA: CONNECTING RESEARCH TO PEACEBUILDING

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The nature of global conflicts has changed and become more complex. Today's conflicts are predominantly internal, involving multiple actors and a myriad of political, social, and economic interests. In such conflicts, resolution actors can help players work effectively and confidentially in difficult circumstances. They are able to reach broader political and social groupings that may pose threats to institutions, within communities, or to national sovereignty through dialogue and mediation. This lecture is hinged on the argument that leveraging synergies between research and peacebuilding practices is catalytic to addressing the plethora of threats to peace and security facing conflict-affected communities in Africa.

Mediation is a way of assisting negotiations between conflict parties and transforming conflict with the support of an acceptable third party. The general goal of mediation is to enable parties in conflict to reach agreements they find satisfactory and are willing to implement. Dialogue, on the other hand, is an open-ended process which aims primarily at creating a culture of communication and search for common ground, leading to confidence-building and improved interpersonal understanding among representatives of opposing parties which, in turn, can help prevent conflict and support

reconciliation and peacebuilding processes. Both concepts have become essential conflict resolution approaches often engaged within the varied conflict contexts in Africa. A practical understanding and knowledge of how to apply them will improve the skills of practitioners at all levels and also enhance 'shared' agreements amongst peoples and societies since the process engages human behaviors and emotions with divergent interests, needs, worldviews, and alignments.

Since the early 1990s, the security environment of Africa has been fraught with a host of varied security challenges. These continue to undermine human security and stability across the continent. Africa has become a hotbed of predatory activities involving terrorism, violent extremism, and armed groups. The Maghreb and Sahel regions are currently home to jihadist groups; Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansaru, Ansa-Dine, Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and others. Additionally, countries in the Lake Chad Basin – Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad – continue to grapple with Boko Haram's lethal attacks and its devastating consequences, including humanitarian crises, and fragility of peace and security in the region.<sup>1</sup> Apart from this, local affiliates of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), a known deadly terrorist group in the Middle East, have established their presence across West Africa. These operate largely in alliance with ISIS as franchises and local armed and extremist groups seeking to extend its brand of extremism across the region and continent. Also, Burkina Faso has become a theatre of terrorism, extremism, and armed attacks since the fall of its longtime ruler, Blaise Compaoré in October 2014. The recent terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso are largely due to the spill-over effect of insecurity in neighboring Mali and Niger.

The increased trend in southward movement of terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso has further raised fears of its possible spread to neighboring coastal countries including Ghana, Togo, and Benin Republic. Apart from these, transnational organized crimes – human and drug trafficking, proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) and cross-border crimes also continue to drive conflicts and insecurity. Furthermore, the political landscape of the continent is also challenged with election-related violence, protests by citizens against youth unemployment, corruption, governance deficits, inadequate social services including lack of good quality education, health, and basic infrastructure. The omnibus effect of this is reflected in increased deterioration of state-citizen relations which continue to impede

social cohesion across Africa. Also, climate change and its concomitant threats – prolonged droughts, rising temperatures, erratic rainfall patterns, and floods – as well as human activities continue to deplete biodiversity and other natural resources that support human livelihoods. The impact of these is evident in growing food insecurity and intractable farmer-herder conflicts which have become a major source of tension and violent conflicts across Africa's sahelian and forest communities. The complexity and enormity of the impact of such threats to security in communities have prompted an array of strategies from the African Union (AU), Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and states and civil society organizations (CSOs) to mitigate threats to peace and security and foster social cohesion. Key among such peacebuilding mechanisms are mediation and dialogue informed by research. While recognizing the utility of mediation in peacebuilding, predicating it on research enhances its effectiveness in addressing most pertinent challenges facing conflict-affected communities. Thus, the nexus between research and peacebuilding has gained considerable currency in recent conversations in African peacebuilding.

From the foregoing, examining the relevance of building synergies between interdisciplinary research and peacebuilding practices lies at the heart of this exploration. As a corollary to this, the lecture highlights the dilemma of mediation especially in West Africa. In addressing the role of mediation in resolution and management of community conflicts, it draws on the experiences of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) in mediating community conflicts as part of its peacebuilding effort in West Africa. This section also sheds light on WANEP's contributions to the implementation of the African peace and security architecture. In the final section, we conclude with a reflection on some best African peacebuilding practices, including its relevance to global peacebuilding. The paper ends with recommendations for enhancing peacebuilding in Africa.

### *The Imperative of Building Synergies between Research and Peacebuilding in Africa*

Conceptually, research brings about changes in levels of understanding, knowledge, and attitude while at the instrumental level, research outcomes can result in changes in practice and policy making.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, research is an essential tool in shaping peacebuilding practice. It has the potential to contribute to the effectiveness of peacebuilding if the latter is hinged on the former. Research examines the context of peace and security and informs

peacebuilding intervention in conflict situations. In view of this, research cannot be divorced from peacebuilding practice.

Another relevant area that bespeaks the need to connect research to peacebuilding lies in the areas of monitoring and evaluation of peacebuilding activities. Frequently, peacebuilding activities of governments, international governmental organizations, civil society organizations, and non-governmental organizations among others are monitored and evaluated through several research and data analysis tools. Employment of such tools in assessing the impact of specific mechanisms or actions informs peacebuilding practitioners, donors and stakeholders on intervention approaches. The theory of change for instance has been a critical research tool behind several peacebuilding practices across the African continent and beyond.

Harnessing the synergies between research and peace is also important in generating and enhancing knowledge and norms in peacebuilding practice. A considerable literature in peacebuilding through research has influenced many policies, national, and international frameworks and conventions that have contributed to peacebuilding practice across the world. Besides, research findings and publications on peacebuilding have influenced a host of advocacy and introduction of international norms on conflict management and resolution and human security. Here, the violent inter-state civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone and its concomitant humanitarian catastrophe contributed towards intensifying the call for the concept of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in international norms and conventions on civilian protection in armed conflicts. Research-based studies further contribute towards bridging the knowledge gaps in peacebuilding practice.

Furthermore, connecting research to peacebuilding practice has the potential of expanding the space for robust collaboration, cooperation, and partnership among practitioners in peace and conflict prevention, resolution and management. Such collaboration and partnership are critical in strengthening dialogue, mediation, and other relevant peacebuilding strategies necessary in resolving complex community conflicts in Africa.

#### *The Centrality of Mediation in Managing Conflicts in Africa*

The African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) emphasizes mediation through the Panel of the Wise (PoW) and its collaboration with regional

mechanisms for conflict prevention, management, and resolution.<sup>3</sup> Prior to this, mediation has been a key instrument of peacebuilding in Africa, especially by the defunct Organization of African Union (OAU), the antecedent continental governmental body of the African Union (AU). Apart from this, mediation is central to traditional peacebuilding mechanisms for conflict prevention in communities in the Africa. These instances are attestations of the relevance of mediation as a critical tool for fostering peace, security, and social cohesion in communities. This is evident in a host of instances in African conflicts.

Within West Africa, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been at the forefront of conflict prevention, resolution, and management. Notable instances include ECOWAS mediation efforts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, and Guinea.<sup>4</sup> Also, ECOWAS's continued effort in mediating protracted political stalemate in Togo and Guinea Bissau is another instance of sub-regional contribution to peace and security. Furthermore, the mediation intervention of ECOWAS in the post-election crisis in The Gambia was critical in averting possible violence. Similarly, the AU's mediation in the 2017 post-election crisis was crucial in arresting further violence which had the potential to destabilize the country. Again, SADC's mediation in the aftermath of the 2008 post-election crisis led to a power-sharing agreement between President Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF and Morgan Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). This also averted potential violence that would have plunged the country in instability. The AU were also played a key role in mediating conflicts in countries such as Rwanda, Burundi and Sudan with the support of the international community. This notwithstanding, mediation effort in South Sudan, Sudan, Central African Republic, and others continue be deadlocked. In spite of this, mediation continues to remain an indispensable mechanism for peacebuilding in Africa.

WANEP is a leading regional peacebuilding organization founded in 1998 in response to the civil wars that plagued West Africa in the 1990s. Over the years, WANEP has succeeded in establishing strong national networks in every member-state of ECOWAS with over 500-member organizations across West Africa (WANEP, 2016). Established at the height of the Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil wars, the birth of WANEP was necessitated by the visible absence of a professional and specialized regional network of CSOs with the expertise and competence to work in the area of conflict resolution and peacebuilding across West Africa.

WANEP's role in dialogue and mediation has been increasingly recognized and acclaimed by major stakeholders and key partners in peace and security. WANEP's emphasis on collaborative approaches and in complementing state effort in addressing conflicts was echoed by the former Secretary to the government of Plateau state (in Nigeria), the late Gynang Nyam Shom, at the Jos dialogue design meeting (February 3 - 4, 2011) when he stated, "the WANEP dialogue and intervention strategy enhances trust and empowers conflict parties to take ownership of the process."<sup>5</sup> The realization that government and nongovernmental collaboration is critical to mitigating the risks and threats of conflicts has been a driving force for WANEP's interventions at the community, national, and regional levels. In this regard, the organization has led several community-based dialogue and mediation efforts across the West African region. It has also been instrumental in creating structures that further facilitate peaceful co-existence in post-conflict communities including the Bawku Inter-Ethnic Peace Committee in Ghana and Plateau State Inter-Community Peace Committee in Nigeria. WANEP has at various times supported the establishment and operationalization of infrastructures for peace and served on peace committees set up by governments in the region where it provided expert knowledge in building peace in conflict-affected communities.<sup>6</sup> These interventions underline WANEP's principles and support for local ownership of peacebuilding and conflict transformation processes and reiterate its philosophy to support rather than replace, encourage rather than undermine, collaborate rather than compete and above all ensure an atmosphere of inclusivity rather than exclusivity.

With proven expertise in both peacebuilding theory and practice, WANEP designs and implements specific interventions for mediating in community conflicts and utilizes its pool of capable staff and network members to provide leadership and coordination of these processes. It is worthy to note that WANEP as a matter of principle does not force intervention and peace processes on conflicting parties. WANEP believes that parties in conflict must be desirous of peace and must take full ownership in any peace process for it to be successful. Thus, the parties in conflict have often times initiated or invited the intervention of WANEP based on the recognition of the organization's expertise, experience, and professionalism. WANEP's modus operandi when invited is to work with the parties to design workable intervention strategies that can address the conflict and provide direction for durable and sustainable peace.

WANEP derives its legitimacy for mediating in community conflicts from the United Nations definition of peacebuilding which “involves a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and laying the foundations for sustainable peace and sustainable development.”<sup>7</sup> WANEP is convinced that any meaningful intervention in community crises is only possible if a platform for multilateral dialogue is developed, engineered and sustained by the communities themselves in finding collective agreement to the causes of the conflict as well as the solutions.

In the search for peaceful transformation of crisis at its nascent stage and to bridge the gap between early warning and early response, WANEP undertakes special interventions in dialogue and mediation with the aim of promoting inter and intra communal dialogue and peaceful coexistence as well as enhance the mediating capacities of communities and other relevant state and inter-governmental bodies. In addition, WANEP is a strong advocate for National Peace Architectures as a national and decentralised mechanism for responding to conflicts and mitigating its effects on civilians. In this regard, WANEP played a crucial role in the establishment of the National Peace Council of Ghana and currently supports the establishment of Peace Architectures in Cote d’Ivoire, Guinea, Nigeria, and Niger. Through these interventions, WANEP has contributed to the mediation of disputes at communal and national levels in several countries notably Ghana, Benin, Guinea, Nigeria, Niger, etc.

Other notable interventions include the Jos Peace Process of Northern Nigeria, where issues revolving around “indigene-settler” dispute immersed Jos, a once peaceful and tranquil destination for tourists from around the world into sectarian conflict. Despite multiple local and national interventions, a common factor that emerged from the interventions revealed a stopgap approach, often performed haphazardly and often insensitive to the cultural nuances of the parties in conflict. This to some extent contributed to the exacerbation of crisis rather than its de-escalation. As such, in collaboration with the Institute of Peace and Conflict Research (IPCR), Abuja, and ECOWAS, WANEP convened a series of dialogues amongst the key ethnic groups culminating in the institutionalisation of an Inter-Ethnic Peace Committee that continues to manage differences and ethnic tensions in the Plateau state, Nigeria.

Given the high stakes in electoral contestations in most West African

countries, elections have become a source of tension and instability. In response to this, WANEP developed the Election Monitoring, Analysis, and Mitigation (E-MAM) programme to support regional and state's efforts to mitigate electoral violence, which has implications for democratic consolidation in West Africa. E-MAM focuses on monitoring, analysing, and reporting electoral violence for early response and mitigation. The programme further enables ECOWAS and WANEP to gain access to community-based conflict information which were hitherto uncollected and unreported but necessary for the purpose of conflict prevention, especially in electoral process. E-MAM further seeks to harness and develop local capacity to avert electoral violence and ensure stability in countries in West Africa. The programme is currently implemented in all the 15 ECOWAS member-states to support peaceful conduct of elections. In Cote D'Ivoire, for instance, through E-MAM, WANEP trained and deployed over 2000 monitors and observers across the country to provide incidence reports at polling centres during the election 2015, to support response of institutions, particularly the Ministry of Interior to ensure peaceful elections.<sup>8</sup> In addition to this, an election situation room (ESR) was set up to support the ECOWAS Election Observation Mission to serve as an information management centre to disseminate incidents and situational reports to stakeholders for response and mitigation of potential threats. Similarly in Nigeria, WANEP E-MAM project created a space for the validation of specific election-violence indicators, for the monitoring of electoral developments in Nigeria and hotspot mapping of potential risk areas across all the 36 States in the country ahead of the 2019 elections.<sup>9</sup> Since its inception, E-MAM has contributed towards enhancing local community ownership of peacebuilding and supporting existing local infrastructure for peace. It has also contributed to the security of states. A notable example is WANEP's support of Ghana's National Peace Council (NPC) in the area of preventing election violence.

In Cote d'Ivoire, WANEP was able to mobilise CSOs including religious and traditional leaders in campaigning against the divisive ethnic politics played by former President Konan Bedie, General Robert Guei and President Laurent Gbagbo that literally divided the country into government-controlled south and rebel-held north.<sup>10</sup> WANEP and Cote d'Ivoire's collaboration played a key role in facilitating CSOs' participation in the Flame of Peace,<sup>11</sup> which symbolised the cessation of fighting and respect of the peace agreement. A monitoring committee was further set up in collaboration with other CSOs to provide quarterly reports regarding the implementation of the Ouagadougou Peace Agreement and update ECOWAS on progress and setbacks. Despite

this, inadequate financial resources remain a challenge to the program.

### *The Dilemma of Mediation in West Africa*

As part of peacebuilding processes in West Africa, mediation is a key element of conflict prevention, resolution and management strategies of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Member-States and civil society organizations in the region. Despite its usefulness, the mediation in the sub-region's conflicts is fraught with challenges including:

#### **1. Appointment of Mediators – Between Good Offices, Morality, and Good Skills**

Morality plays a critical role in mediation not only in West Africa, but across the world. Thus, the mediator or third-party to conflict must have credibility and reputation that is acceptable by the feuding parties. Characteristically, ECOWAS mostly relies on the experience of sitting Presidents and former Presidents as well as diplomats in mediation processes in conflicts. Though the use of such mediators has contributed towards facilitating the peaceful resolution of conflicts in some areas – Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire – in other cases, the credibility of mediators remains a challenge and hinders peaceful resolution of conflicts. What would be the moral standing of President Museveni to mediate the controversy over term limits in Burundi? How would an ex-military leader negotiate democratic transitions?

#### **2. Impartiality and Neutrality**

Impartiality remains a key principle underpinning mediation processes in conflicts. Therefore, a mediator is expected to respect and represent the interest of both feuding parties in order to win their trust. Trust-building is an important ingredient that facilitates peaceful resolution of conflicts. Therefore, the neutrality of the mediator is key. Yet, the multiplicity of interests (state and non-state actors) in West African conflicts sometimes affect its resolution. This is one of the factors hindering the resolution of the current impasse in Togo. Interestingly, one of the principles of impartiality suggests that mediators should not pursue predetermined outcomes, but rather allow the process to generate the outcome. Is this also the case where there are existing protocols that outline how the mediation process would conclude and what cannot be compromised? How would you not have had a predetermined outcome in the Gambian mediation process?

Mediation and dialogue processes are necessarily subject to certain norms. Compliance with, or abuse of norms relevant to peace mediation may have consequences for actors, those affected and the viability of agreements. That is why, AU and ECOWAS impress on its Mediators the need to adhere to its policies, and standards of international law.

### **3. Inclusivity**

Peace agreements often fail because of limited space for inclusivity. For this reason, inclusive designing of the peace process could be a decisive factor in reaching long-term success in the resolution of conflicts. Inclusivity in mediation processes in West African conflicts is inadequate, as key actors such as women and youth who are key components of victims of armed conflicts and population of the most States in the sub-region are largely excluded. Issues related to gender and the youth factor must be given greater attention to enhance participation of such important groups in conflict resolution. The dilemma with inclusivity as a germane factor in mediation is how to define it—gender and youth? Conflict actors—should rebels and combatants be included? What happens in political disputes where the actors are already defined by the issues in conflict? How can we justify the inclusion of those regarded as illegitimate groups by the state and international norms?

### **4. National Ownership, Socio-Cultural and Geo-Political Context and External Influence**

The content and outcome of a mediation process should be defined by those who are immediately affected – not by third parties or those who support the process, as this would lower the prospects of ending the conflict. The understanding, knowledge and appreciation of the socio-cultural dynamics of the conflict environment also remains critical to the success of conflict resolution within West Africa. Access to knowledge, particularly high quality research-based knowledge is a key resource for mediators. Every conflict has its own peculiarities – actors, causes, internal and geopolitical dynamics – which influence its resolution. In this regard, the mediator should have a better understanding of these dynamics to facilitate the peace process. Though such considerations are factored into mediation processes in West Africa, in other instances the involvement of mediators outside the geopolitical jurisdiction of the conflicts become counterproductive to the mediation processes. The erroneous assumption is that every good mediator

can fit into the African context without consideration for the cultural nuances of the continent. Such an assumption is capable of complicating mediation processes, particularly when mediators are appointed to satisfy an intergovernmental organization's quota and/or political interests. The likely result is that the effectiveness and positive outcomes of mediation processes and its sustainability thereof is compromised. For instance, age is an important factor in the African milieu and would be considered ahead of skills by parties in conflict. Knowledge of parables and idioms is a mark of wisdom. Gender also plays its own role and yet the foregoing are not considerations in appointing track 1 mediators.

## **5. Time and Funding Challenges**

Mediation processes are limited by time and funding challenges. Increasingly, mediation in West Africa is funded by donor organizations, development partners and international governmental organizations, particularly the European Union (EU). Such funding is mostly premised on specific timelines and budgetary allocations which influence the pace of mediation. For this reason, when parties begin to enjoy the mediation facilities and material incentives, it becomes problematic and could undermine peace processes in the region as they seek to elongate the process beyond the funding cycle. Another dilemma is the independence of such process and the pressure coming from the funding partners to resolve the ongoing conflict.

### *Conclusion and Way Forward*

In seeking to end conflict it is the ability of parties to resolve their differences that is decisive and desirable. Strong national capacities for dialogue and mediation support the conflict transformation potential of a society. This requires institutional mechanisms that can provide the necessary support structures, for instance, through 'Infrastructures for Peace', i.e. dynamic networks of interdependent structures, mechanisms, resources, values, and skills, which, through dialogue and consultation, research, and knowledge management, contribute to conflict prevention and peace building in a society.

As highlighted, mediation remains a critical tool for peacebuilding in the African continent. Equally, research also plays an important role in enhancing mediation and peacebuilding. The nexus between research and peacebuilding practice has also been demonstrated. In light of this, the need

to enhance a robust synergy between research and peacebuilding practice is imperative in mitigating the plethora of security challenges facing Africa. Importantly, the imperative of CSOs, particular WANEP in supporting the implementation of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) is critical to peace and security in Africa. In view of this, fostering partnership among researchers and peacebuilding practitioners is a crucial step towards harnessing the synergies necessary for enhancing peace and security in Africa.

In light of the above, the paper recommends the following:

- \* The large number of actors in a highly competitive field must not be allowed to cause ineffectiveness, duplication, or lack of coordination in the processes. There is the need for the AU, RECs, CSOs, and the knowledge community to create more space for strengthening collaboration to enhance synergy in bolstering peace and security in Africa;
- \* We believe that the issues addressed in a mediation process and included in the resulting peace agreement must also be the factors that lead to lasting resolution of conflicts. We therefore consider it essential that mediation and dialogue processes are enriched by the necessary expertise and knowledge;
- \* There is need to strengthen the AU Mediation Support Unit (MSU), and the ECOWAS Mediation Facilitation Division (MFD) and enhance the development of National Peace Infrastructures. Infrastructure for Peace (I4P) strengthens structures and systems of peacebuilding at the micro-level. It increases the possibility of enhancing macro platforms to address salient causes of conflict and violence that bedevils the polity. A typical community whether urban or rural is composed of various institutions such as the traditional leaderships, council of chiefs, elders, youth associations, community development associations, women groups, religious institutions and various large or small-scale businesses, local government councils and political parties. By reorganizing these units under an umbrella of infrastructure for peace, it increases the opportunities for consensus-building, joint problem-solving and peacebuilding efforts;
- \* Traditional perspectives, understandings, and solutions to conflict should be integrated into the mediation processes in Africa. These traditional mechanisms should be strengthened to promote and sustain a shared vision of society and a culture of peace. Values of reconciliation, tolerance, trust

,and confidence-building, mediation and dialogue as responses to conflict. With an expected increase in the diversity of citizens within the country, the promotion of social inclusion and cohesion is more important than ever;

\* Peacebuilding and conflict management strategies require long-term funding by governments, donors, NGOs, and communities. It is important to have a component of mediation facility in Africa that coordinates fundraising, resource mobilization, and ensure synergy of purpose locally. African solutions to African problems with external funding will remain utopic. Africa-centered basket funding for peace activities through reliance on local sources will reduce over-reliance on external donors, and the duplication of efforts. It will also enable African ownership of its peace architecture;

\* The AU, RECs, and development partners should increase support for CSOs and the knowledge community to enhance community peacebuilding activities and generate the requisite knowledge necessary for supporting such efforts;

\* It is also imperative for the AU and RECs and states to increase support for CSOs in order for them to continue to enhance the capacity and increase participation of women and youth in peacebuilding in communities in Africa;

\* CSOs and the knowledge community should strengthen collaboration with organizations like the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) that support African scholars through its programs, in generating research and knowledge in peacebuilding practices which would form the basis of enhancing advocacy, policies, and frameworks that promote peacebuilding in Africa.

## NOTES

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9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. The "flame of peace" symbolized the journey towards dialogue, reconciliation and commitment to the enthronement of democratic

ethos through the conduct of free, fair and credible election in Cote d'Ivoire. On July 30, 2007 President Laurent Gbagbo and Prime Minister Soro Guillaume participated in the process alongside other stakeholders including CSOs/WANEP that witnessed the setting ablaze of a stockpile of arms as a sign to end hostilities.

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