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COMMUNITY-BASED CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND PEACE-BUILDING STRATEGIES IN TESO SUB-REGION IN UGANDA

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ABSTRACT

The paper intends to investigate community-based conflict management and peacebuilding strategies in Teso sub-region in Eastern Uganda. The approach engaged is content analysis, a literature review on existing articles and field experience in Teso. Using a case study as a research design. In relation to armed conflicts that include the; civil wars, Lord's Resistance incursion and Karamojong induced cattle rustling. The review was guided by the following specific objectives; to examine the successes, limitations and gaps in community-based conflict management and peacebuilding strategies. To Identify gaps and make recommendations for the strengthening of community-based peacebuilding mechanisms. The article found that; the community-based peacebuilding strategies employed in conflict areas, mainly involved traditional institutions as an entry point to the communities and also very instrumental in asserting community confidence in the process. The processes included the participation of council of elders and the traditional chieftaincy system. In addition, the use of traditional rites and rituals as form of cleansing and appeasement for the dead, remorseful acknowledgement of the bloodshed of innocent community members, caused by the violent conflict. It further included, the active inclusion and involvement of inter-religious councils, faith-based organisations, civil society actors. The peacebuilding undertaken was community driven, voluntary and also received supplementary support from non-governmental organisations that facilitated the hosting of dialogues held with different conflict parties including State. Community based peacebuilding strategies were found to be successful in; Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia and Uganda. Specifically, in Northern Uganda in the Madi, Acholi, Langi and Teso sub-region in Uganda. These were majorly successful as a result of understanding the root causes of the conflict, clearly defined conflict parties, acknowledgement of security failure to protect lives, property and interests of the people. The realisation of the need for peace led to the promotion of the local initiatives by community leaders that opened up space for dialogues that engaged with representatives of the conflicting parties. Therefore, making community peace-building efforts reliable and most effective approach, especially, when they work in complementarity with State institutions. However, the absence of formal legal recognition by the State institutions in the integration of community-based peacebuilding structures, could lead to disintegration, erosion of traditional peace structures. It could further, lead to its being disregarded by the youth,

especially, due to growing inter-generational gap. Traditional council of elders and the inter-religious councils ought to integrate the youth and their resourcefulness to the peacebuilding systems and structures. Furthermore, it is urgent that gender mainstreaming, leads to involvement of women in the peacebuilding processes, inclusion in the structures, institutions and in formal legal frameworks. The largely patriarchy nature of traditional institutions limits the undeniable contribution and participation of women in high level interface dialogues. The intergenerational gap that is creeping in should strive to resolve the integration and inclusion of youth in the traditional structures. Noting that youth as source of labour contribute, during armed conflicts. Checklist included; identifying articles for review, on countries, that had conflicts in which community-based peacebuilding approaches were engaged, and using this information to conduct the review

INTRODUCTION

Conflicts take various forms, from low-intensive conflicts characterized by community tensions, shimmering conflicts that brew into high flamed conflicts with elements of violence to out-blown war. It is further argued that conflicts are a slow on-set human disaster that can be prevented and should not be left uninterrupted to a level where, it claims human lives, disrupts livelihoods, destroys property and causes displacement of populations. Consequently, unresolved community level conflict may escalate into civil war that may disrupt the stability of a given State. Noting the, stability of States, constitutes an integral part of international peace and security.

In all these stages, conflicts can be mitigated and resolved. However, initiators and engineers of conflicts, tend to set the direction, pace and scale of the conflict, based on their intent and expected returns or outcomes of the conflict. While relying on the existing resources, capabilities, allies and or collaborative support against their target.

Therefore, a sustained conflict, can be premised on the unmatched scale of support and commitments made by entities facilitating it spiraling into violence.

As a result of violent conflict, communities are often left in state of shock and with permanent scares of loss that put a strain on their mental ability to cop. Consequently, out of necessity to survive affected communities, tend to develop grassroot structurers for reconstituting their peace and normalcy. These initiatives, have informed the framing of national and internationally established formal peacebuilding frameworks. It is not surprising that, societies will often revert to the local community-based conflict management and peace building systems to rebuild communities when the State and international partners have failed them. These trends are particularly, observed in fragile contexts where State mechanisms have failed in their obligation to provide security and protection for their citizens. Including where State authority, have been

degraded by violent conflicts, or weaken and have lost the trust of the local communities. Moreover, even cold or low-intensive conflicts can fun a flame, therefore, it is apparent that, peace must be reached with the inclusion of community-based peacebuilding strategy. As an alternative to violence, conflict management and peacebuilding are processes that must be combined in any interventions. Conflict management and peacebuilding have largely, been seen as the domain of State actors and international institutions. However, over the past few decades, scholars and practitioners have increasingly emphasized the importance of community-based approaches particularly in post-conflict and fragile settings (Lederach. 1997: Mac Ginty, 2011). In Africa these approaches are embedded in the culture, traditions and social values of the communities, evidently, they are rooted in longstanding indigenous practices that emphasize the restorative justice and social harmony (Murithi, 2006). As argued above, often, the local communities will activate their revered traditional mechanisms, apply community elders' diplomacy with the warring parties, in order to dissolve the conflict and move to focus on restoration of normalcy. As a result, making them pivotal, and a critical component of sustainable peace efforts across the globe.

This paper explores the development and effectiveness of community-based conflict management strategies from the global, Africa, East Africa and Uganda perspectives.

It focuses on how indigenous and local mechanisms promote reconciliation, restore peace and prevent violence. Highlights some successes, limitations and gaps in community peacebuilding strategies, concluding with in-depth-review of practices in Uganda's Teso Sub-region.

Community-Based Peacebuilding

Community-based peacebuilding it can be argued, is a community-centred conflict resolution mechanism that has contributed to healing, reconciliation and peace in conflict-torn communities. Globally, community-based peacebuilding has gained traction as a viable alternative that complements the top-down approach practiced by States and at the international level. Evidently, acknowledging a community participatory approach that feeds the process form the bottom-top with ownership and custodianship of the peacebuilding process. In this mechanism, communities define their own approaches and styles in peacebuilding efforts therefore allowing them to evolve, blending it with cultural, community values and accepted norms. Clearly, communities are complex social networks that are inherently, resistant to forced or imposed practices. As may be observed, it is such measures that lead to failures in externally led peacebuilding frameworks that tend to lack sensitivity to the context and the root causes of the conflict.

The United Nations and international organizations have made efforts to

contribute to peacebuilding efforts alongside the high level; State and Non-State actors, Inter-States and State versus Alliance of States. These all-forms communities but rather, at the global level. Evidently, a gap exists between the two frameworks and what links them, could be drawn from the community-based peacebuilding frameworks. It could explain why, the United Nations and other partners are focused on community led interventions where regional efforts have failed, facilitated local conflict management and peace building efforts. As such these learnings have been utilized to inform policies at national and international level. With the international organizations and institutions acknowledging the role of local actors in building sustainable peace (United Nations, 2015).

The very nature of human existence generates situations that lead to conflict and the need to resolve them through peaceful settlement. Conflicts resorted to by military means to acquire peace, tend to go-underground and reoccur especially when communities are not engaged to the peace building process. The Israel – Palestinian conflict that is one of the longest in the modern era, has been characterized by military violence since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, and has not engaged the local communities in the peacebuilding process. The conflict then takes on a vicious cycle of violence and hate. Doğan (2016) is of the view, occurrence of conflict in any environment in which humans are present appears to be normal. It can be added that

this seeming normality, can be a result of clashing interests and a growing dominance of one party over the beam of the conflict pendulum. While, Lederach (1997), a leading scholar in peacebuilding, introduced the concept of conflict transformation which underscores the importance of addressing the root causes of conflict through relationship building and inclusive local processes. He advocates for empowering grassroots actors to take ownership of peace processes, thus making peacebuilding more sustainable and culturally relevant. This view is reinforced by Mamucao (2022) who asserts that, peacebuilding does not only revolve around initiatives at macro level. Mamucao traces the peacebuilding process down to the family unit where it is integrated with social work in Maguindanao in the Philippines. Emphasising the role of parenting as the foundation for instilling peace and organised communities as foundation for preventing conflict

Pre-State communities practiced, inter-community dialogues, exchange of gifts, singing of pacts and covenants, compensatory measures for the aggrieved parties and these were marked by celebrations. These practices have been adapted into international practices, although, in more complex forms. Clearly, parties get involved in advocacy and activism to highlight the conflict and its effects, this choice are often observed in situations where power is unbalanced and the awareness of the conflict is relatively low (Lederach, 1995). Evidently, in many African societies, traditional conflict resolution

mechanisms predate the State. These are reflected in the, council of elders, reconciliation rituals, kinship-based arbitration, community dialogues and peace pacts. According to Murithi (2006), these mechanisms promote social harmony through restorative justice, rather than punitive measures.

West Africa, especially the *sahel* region is affected by armed terrorist including conflicts between crop farmers and animal herders. The nature of violence has involved counter terrorist measures by the States. Community-based conflict management actors use the traditional structures in negotiating for the re-integration of children and women rescued from the insurgents by government forces. While for instance, in Ghana, the chieftaincy institutions play a critical role in resolving land and inheritance disputes. In sierra Leone and Liberia, truth-telling ceremonies and community cleansing rituals were integral to post-conflict recovery and resettlement efforts, particularly after civil wars (Zartman, 200). These practices often involve apology, compensation, and integration rather than incarceration or retribution.

However, these systems face increasing pressure from formal State institutions and legal systems that often fail to integrate indigenous mechanisms meaningfully (Odendaal, 2013).

In East Africa, countries like Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda have seen the proliferation of community-based conflict resolution efforts. In Kenya, especially following the 2007-2008 post-election violence, local peace committees and elder councils were instrumental in community healing and conflict mediation (Kariuki, 2015). Similarly, in Ethiopia, local elders and customary institutions, known as *shimglina,* play a major role in conflict arbitration, particularly in Oromia and Somali regions (Boege*, 2006).* Nevertheless, challenges persist, including the erosion of traditional authority, politization of local institutions and lack of formal recognition by State (Helland, 2010).

Uganda's post-independence history is marked by internal conflicts, from the Idi Amin regime to the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency in the north including in Teso Sub-region. In response, peacebuilding initiatives have combined State-led Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) programs with community led reconciliation and trauma healing. The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) war in northern Uganda including the Teso Sub-region, reaped the local communities of their economy base, human capital, social fabric, education, food production and livelihoods. As the conflict raged claiming more lives lost, communities' apathy and fatigued, the religious and traditional leaders jointly pushed for community-based conflict management and peacebuilding strategies that brought the conflict to its conclusion. Evoking the traditional rituals, was a significant strategy that appealed to the communities for reconciliation and rebuilding their social cohesion. The *Mato Oput* ritual in Northern Uganda, a traditional

Acholi practice, has been widely recognized for its effectiveness in restoring harmony between victims and perpetrators (Baines, 2007). These approaches have been supported by Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs) and faith-based organisations, particularly the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiatives (ARLPI).

The Teso Sub-region in Eastern Uganda experienced significant conflict due to Karamjong armed cattle rustling since the pre-colonial rule, intensifying with the introduction of the automatic machine guns and during the civil wars fought in Uganda particularly through the late1970s to early 1990s. Including during the LRA incursions into Teso sub-region through first half of 2000s. This left behind deep social divisions, displacement, poverty and trauma. Evidently, modeling successful conflict and peacebuilding processes are dependent on the understanding of root causes of the conflict and as argued by Lederach (1997) must rrespect and draw from, the cultural knowledge of a people.

In Teso, indigenous mechanisms such as *Aiyelem* reconciliation ritual and clan-based mediation by elders continue to play a central role in resolving disputes (Otim & Wierda, 2010). Spearheaded by the traditional leaders, these cultural practices were used to restore community confidence in the conflict management and peace building structures. Community-based management and peace building processes were often supported by faith-based organizations like the Justice and Peace Commission (JPC), including, women groups, youth and peace committees. These actors actively interfaced with the local communities and the State institutions at all levels. Communities rely on practical solutions that exhibit trust and provide emotional understanding to their plight and loss. Rebuilding peace stems from within communities, the realization that loss cannot be recovered, memories can be held onto and that healing process must begin. A collective of elders, religious leaders and the bounding cry of women helped Teso heal itself from within.

Women particularly, through local groups and peace activists, have contributed to reconciliation and trauma healing by facilitating dialogues, reintegration of ex-combatants, and peace education in schools and communities (Apuuli, 2011). However, challenges remain, including the lack of legal recognition for traditional conflict resolution systems, resource constraints and generational gaps that reduce youth engagement in these traditional structures. Youth particularly, have been relied upon in leading counter-insurgencies during the cattle rustling induced conflicts, Alice Lakwena and the LRA incursion into Teso Sub-region. A responsibility they volunteered to take-on in order, to defend and protect communities in Teso region. however, these roles need to be, further integrated in into the community structures.

Limitations in Community-Based conflict management and Peacebuilding

While these approaches have shown promise, their effectiveness is often undermined by lack legal and institutional recognition. In many countries, traditional and community-based conflict resolution mechanism are not formally recoganised within national legal framework. This leads to ambiguity regarding their legitimacy, authority, and scope of operation. In Uganda for instance, traditional institutions are often sidelines in formal justice processes despite their significant role in maintaining community order and resolving disputes. Odendaal, 2013) observes that the absence of a legal mandate often renders community structures vulnerable to being overridden or ignored by State actors, reducing their long-term impact. Without formal backing decisions made by community elders or local peace committees can be challenged or reversed, especially, in cases involving land or criminal disputes.

Limited resources and capacity hinder efforts as most community-based initiatives operate with minimal funding, training or logistical support. Community mediators often work on a voluntary basis, which limits their ability to cover large areas or handle complex disputes. This lack of institutional support impairs the quality, consistency and sustainability of their interventions. Borge et al (2009) argue that local peacebuilding efforts often suffer from" fragility" not because of local ineffectiveness, but due to poor resourcing and lack of structural support from State institutions and donors. Furthermore, NGOs are temporal in their operations and so are their engagements in peace building processes. NGO are project driven and reliant on donor priorities and funding cycles, therefore leading to the disruption peacebuilding efforts due to abrupt closure of projects and donor funding.

Gender inequality and exclusion as mechanisms are embedded within patriarchal traditions that marginalize women and youth. Although, women play significant roles in informal peacebuilding, where they contribute as counsellors, care givers, healers as well as mobilisers, they are underrepresented in decision making roles within community structures, Tripp et al (2009) note that, despite the increasing role of women in grass-root peace movements across Africa, traditional dispute resolution systems still limit their formal authority ad recognition. In places like Teso region, while women groups have made significant contributions, they continue to face resistance when pushing for leadership roles in male dominated elder councils.

There is generational divide and limited youth as they perceive community-based conflict management as outdated and irrelevant to their modern experiences. Many young people young people feel disconnected from the traditional authority structures. This is especially, noticeable among young people living in especially, in urban and conflict affected regions. This

alienation can lead disillusionment, vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups or engagement in criminal activities. Uvin (2009) points out that peacebuilding strategies that fail to meaningfully engage youth risk undermining their own sustainability, as youth are both potential spoilers and critical agents of change. In Teso for example, unemployed or marginalized youth have been identified as key drivers of land conflicts and cattle theft, especially where community structures exclude them from leadership and decision-making.

Politicization of traditional structures have often disrupted community peacebuilding efforts. Community leaders and traditional authorities sometimes get entangled in political patronage and groups, thereby undermining their neutrality and credibility in the communities. When local leaders align with political partes or ethnic factions, they risk being seen as biased which erodes community trust. Mac Ginty (2011) argues that, hybrid peace systems are vulnerable to "elite capture", where powerful individuals absorb local structures to serve political or personal interests. In Uganda, some clan and religious leaders have been co-opted into government led peace processes, resulting to suspicion and resistance among certain community factions.

The formal justice systems have been inadequately integrated into the community-based conflict management processes. While, community-based conflict management is effective in resolving minor disputes and promoting reconciliation including between communities and the State, it often lacks the mechanisms to deal with serious crimes, enforcing rulings and or ensuring accountability. The absence of a recognized structured interface between formal courts and informal mechanisms leads to duplication, contradiction, or legal loopholes. Lederach (1997) emphasizes the need for a multi-level peace architecture where traditional and formal institutions work collaboratively rather than in isolation. In several East African contexts, including Uganda, there is a growing need for hybrid systems that also mutual recognition and sharing of roles between traditional leaders, local governments, and judicial bodies.

Rigidity in cultures influence community resistance to reform. The resistance to cultural evolution has created rigid traditional systems that are ill equipped to handle new forms of conflict such as cybercrime, gender-based violence, inter-religious and ideological related disputes. Moreover, some customs perpetuate harmful, practices or reinforce inequality such as early child and forced marriages, child compensation in land disputes as maybe in some communities. Boege (2006) warns that romanticizing tradition can obscure its oppressive elements, particularly for women, minorities and other marginalized groups. Community based conflict management mechanisms must be allowed to evolve so as to integrate contemporary values such as; human rights,

gender equality, women and youth inclusion to remain legitimate and effective.

Conclusion and way forward

Community based conflict management strategies offer integral culturally grounded participatory and sustainable pathways to peace. Especially in fragile and post conflict societies where the functions of the States have equally been devastated by war. In Teso sub-region, through the 1980s to mid-2000s, traditional community-based management and peacebuilding strategies helped rebuild and restore peace, social cohesion, social trust and facilitated reconciliation. However, for these systems to thrive, the traditional structures will need to consider documenting processes, including those previously conducted, including establishing a library of conflict incidents and how they were resolved.

The elders need to lobby for the inclusion of the Iteso traditional diplomacy frameworks for recognition of its role in conflict resolution in Teso and neighboring communities as was the case when elders joined those in the Teso Sub-region to advocate for peace and engaged with the State on mechanism to resolve the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) armed conflict. Women played a significant role especially during the 1980s -90s war, when the highlighted how the loss of their husbands and sons to war had left them widows and children orphaned. These factors had transformed the gender roles, with women taking on responsibilities of household

heads including stepping up to speak out for their fellow women and for their communities. They appealed to their sons and husbands to abandon the conflict and comeback to rebuild the community. They also lobbied for amnesty form the State for their beloved families' members.

Equally, during the LRA incursion into the Teso Sub-region, the women encouraged their sons and husbands to get involved in protecting communities and liberating the region and discouraged them from joining the rebellion. The peacebuilding processes engaged women and children in raising awareness on the impact of the conflict on the community lives. Therefore, it is critical that the traditional peacebuilding structures main stream gender, recognize the role women play in appealing to community emotions, they must be formerly recognized, and have to work in complementarity with State institutions. Peacebuilding efforts ought to focus on capacity building, inter-generational dialogues and strengthening institutional frameworks that enhance central role of local actors. Strong structures, embolden communities and encourages active participation, ownership of the peacebuilding processes and enhances continuity. It also guarantees protection and safety of those involved on behalf of their communities.

Clearly, weak community structures affect the pathways for any conflict and peace building efforts. Therefore, enhancing capacities of grassroot structures, through

continuous trainings in lobbying, advocacy, negotiations and mediation is a critical necessity for the 21st century. Conflicts have entered the electronic and digital phase and local communities should not be left behind. Information on experiences, strategies and lessons learnt by different community-based conflict management and peacebuilding structures should be digitalized and shared for other communities to borrow experiences and or compare the challenges met and design more comprehensive frameworks. Furthermore, to this is the urgent digitalization of the traditional frameworks, detailing the processes involved in establishing participation processes. Clearly, future peacebuilding efforts should focus on capacity building, intergenerational dialogue, and institutional frameworks. This should feed into the futuristic perspective of conflicts that engage artificial intelligence with less of human interface.

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