



## PREVENTIVE PEACE BUILDING: A CASE FOR COMMUNITY PEACE BUILDING

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### Need for Stability and Durable Peace in Africa

Africa is in need of durable peace for it to realize its full potential. It is the area most severely impacted by armed conflict, with more people being killed in wars in the continent than in the rest of the world combined. African countries rich in natural resources have experienced decades of corruption and civil war. Tribal and religious conflicts, most notably in Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Sudan, have fuelled genocide and massive movement of refugees and IDPs.

The source of conflict in Africa seems to reflect the diversity and complexity of Africa's past and present. Some sources are purely internal, some reflect the dynamics of a particular sub-region, and some have important international dimensions. Despite these differences the sources of conflict in Africa are linked by a number of common experiences. Ongoing research on conflict in Africa has identified the following factors as some of the causes of internal conflict: competition over land and resources, growing inequality; increasing crime, corruption and illegal activities; weak and unstable political regimes and institutions; identity politics; historical legacies such as colonialism; poverty and negative ethnicity.

One of the major impacts of violent conflict and social instability is poverty. Much of the poverty in Africa is arising from what is often referred to as *structured violence*: a situation in which owing to poor governance structures, weak institutions and unequal access and distribution of economic resources, some segments of the population tend to have better opportunities than others. This inevitably alters power relations and in turn leads to the persistence of poverty among certain groups with serious consequences for social stability. When people perceive poverty as being inflicted on them, it is easy for them to rebel against an oppressive status quo.

Poverty is more extreme in countries engulfed in conflict wherever you look in Africa. There is a negative impact of armed conflict on life chances and livelihoods of households and communities as a result of the destruction. In addition, negative results occur because of targeting civilian populations, their assets, networks and social capital. Generally, growth and welfare stagnate or fall because of armed conflict.

### Building Sustainable Peace

There are varied ways of understanding peace building. According to the United Nations, peace building consists of a wide range of activities associated with capacity building, reconciliation, and social transformation. Peace building is a long-term process that occurs after violent conflict has slowed down or come to a halt. Thus, it is the phase of the peace process that takes place after peacemaking and peacekeeping (UN, 1992). Many NGOs on the other hand, understand peace building as an umbrella concept that encompasses not only long-term transformative efforts, but also peacemaking and peacekeeping. In this view, peace building includes early warning and response efforts, violence prevention, advocacy work, civilian and military peacekeeping/intervention, humanitarian assistance, ceasefire agreements, and the establishment of peace zones.

Whatever the case, peace building is a process that facilitates the establishment of durable peace and tries to prevent the recurrence of violence by addressing root causes and effects of conflict through reconciliation, institution building, and political as well as economic transformation. This consists of a set of physical, social, and structural initiatives that are often an integral part of post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation.

The central task of peace building is to create positive peace, a "stable social equilibrium in which the surfacing of new disputes does not escalate into violence and war." Sustainable peace is characterized by the absence of physical and structural violence, the elimination of discrimination, and self-sustainability. Moving towards this sort of environment goes beyond problem solving or conflict management. Peace building initiatives try to fix the core problems that underlie the conflict and change the patterns of interaction of the involved parties. They aim to move a given population from a condition of extreme vulnerability and dependency to one of self-sufficiency and well being.

To further understand the notion of peace building, some draw a distinction between post-conflict peace building and long-term peace building. Post-conflict peace building is connected to peacekeeping, and often involves demobilization and reintegration programs, as well as immediate reconstruction needs. Meeting immediate needs and handling crises is no doubt crucial. But while peacemaking and peacekeeping processes are an important part of peace transitions, they are not enough in and of themselves to meet longer-term needs and build a lasting peace.

Long-term strategies to build sustainable peace also referred to as preventive peace building are designed to fill this gap, and to address the underlying substantive issues that brought about conflict. Various transformation techniques aim to move parties away from confrontation and violence, and towards political and economic participation, peaceful relationships, and social harmony. This longer-term perspective is crucial to future violence prevention and the promotion of a more peaceful future.

### Community Peace Building

In the event of armed conflict in many parts of Africa, it is rural communities who are most vulnerable and are directly exposed to the ravages of civil war and social instability, and specifically women and children. Communities provide recruiting and sometimes support bases for the military forces and armed militias. Therefore, peace building and conflict transformation efforts need to focus on building the capacity of rural communities to become propagators and custodians of peace rather than victims of violence. And yet often, peace building and conflict management programmes are initiated and planned by actors at national level with little or no participation of affected communities. No wonder then there seems to be little to show for massive infusion of funds by different actors to bring about durable peace in Africa, for without the participation of affected communities, building durable peace will be nothing more than a mirage.

Community peace building should be the application of theory and best practice in peace building as applied to meet the specific situation of a particular community. The goal is to achieve positive coexistence or positive peace built on the capacity of the community to understand and analyze its particular conflict situation and to apply constructive mechanisms to advocate and redress the issues, structures and relationships that underlie and perpetuate violent conflict or social instability.

Based on this understanding, community peace building will entail certain activities geared toward entrenching a sustainable culture of peace. And since rebuilding communities torn by violent conflict at post conflict stage is at best such a challenging, tedious, massively expensive and in many ways an uncertain process, it should always be more advisable to apply pro-active and preventive peace building measures at the pre-conflict stage to prevent violent conflict breaking out.

Engaging in prejudice reduction work with groups at all levels of society, from national leaders to local community members and to children in schools. Prejudice reduction activities focus on identifying and changing negative attitudes towards ethnic, religious, political or other groups who are disliked. It is one form of violent conflict prevention because it reduces a source of tension in societies and encourages people to be more accepting of others and their ethnic, cultural, religious and physical differences.

Conflict resolution training: Since conflict is natural and unavoidable and often provides necessary energy to drive positive change in society, conflict resolution training is designed to help improve communication patterns and give people new tools to deal with conflicts constructively to address their differences without resulting to violence; including mediation, negotiation, problem solving, and arbitration among others.

Building collaborative mechanisms as well as local and national capacities and structures to address conflicts through dialogue rather than violence. This is one way of getting community groups and other stakeholders for peace building including state and non state actors to remain engaged with conflict issues and formulate mechanisms for early warning and early response so as to prevent conflict and stabilize potentially volatile situations.

Non-violent advocacy or advocacy training to address structural injustices and thereby achieve social justice. Advocacy brings public attention to issues of injustice that may not be well understood, and brings the power of groups to bear to even out political and economic power imbalances without resulting to force. It is important to be aware though that advocacy increases the level of tension in societies because it raises controversial issues publicly and it threatens those in power. Therefore measures should be taken to prevent emergence of violence.

Human rights education and training at all levels of society to create an awareness of what a just society looks like by identifying which rights and responsibilities people have.

Economic and other income generating activities so as to transform structural injustices, social inequities and contribute to building relationships across lines of tension. Development projects can involve participants from opposing communities in ways that build bridges between the communities, transform their relationships, prevent violent conflict and lay the foundation for just peace.

Research and analysis of issues precipitating the conflict is important to be able to carry out effective advocacy with policy makers so that they can be informed about these issues. The Media can also be used to publicize these issues to create awareness to the larger public on the same, without sensationalizing or polarizing the issues. This may help to minimize misperceptions that may tend to aggravate the situation.

### Conclusion

Time has come for communities in Africa to play their role as active participants and stakeholders for peace, security and development in their regions, without which they will continue to be marginalized and placed at the periphery of development activities, thus perpetuating patronage and poverty. This paper advocates for community peace building as a paradigm shift to find creative approaches to redress conflict and development issues, and thus foster durable peace in Africa.

Sources  
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