

Rethinking Conflict Resolution Strategies by Harnessing African Indigenous Mechanisms for Effective Psychosocial Wellbeing of Displaced Persons affected by protracted conflicts in Africa

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Abstract:

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of life as it happens in all families, communities, villages, tribes, countries, continents and the world at large. Conflict management and conflict resolution in indigenous African societies provided opportunity to interact with all parties concerned, it promoted consensus-building, social bridge reconstructions and enactment of order in the society. Mediation, adjudication, reconciliation, negotiation and cross examination, which were employed by Africans in the past in conflict resolution, offer great prospects for peaceful co-existence and harmonious relationships in post-conflict periods. Conflict resolution comprised a complex network of forces surrounding the parties in the conflict, who contribute positive energy for psychosocial wellbeing of affected persons. The task of conflict resolution was to bring back harmony between individuals, families and communities, often culminating in symbolic traditional rituals to eliminate any future reoccurrence. Acceptance and performance of rituals of reconciliation by both parties was an outward sign on inward grace that they will never engage into such conflicts again. Unfortunately in our societies today conflict between different parties seem to persist for long periods and often escalate to serious crises without any effective and efficient solutions. Conflict that we thought had come to an end often resurface and become more devastating with negative psychosocial implications than what had happened in the past. Modern conflicts reoccur and persist because resolution strategies are built on oppression, suppression and at times avoidance of one party in favour of another due to self-interest of mitigating authorities. It is therefore important to rethink effective conflict management and resolution mechanisms that will not only end the current conflict, but go a long way to prevent future conflicts and enhance the psychosocial wellbeing of the parties that have been affected by conflict.

Keywords: Conflict resolution; Conflict management; African indigenous mechanisms; Psychosocial wellbeing.

Introduction

Disagreements between individuals, groups or countries often lead to conflict situations. Peters (2006) sees conflict as a state of disagreement may lead to crisis or violence (Peters, 2006). Peters (2006) notes that conflict, at all levels, may arise due to the desire for political, economic and social advantages, greed, ego-related problems, injustice, inequitable distribution of resources and plain mischief. Grimbale and Wellard (1997) categorized conflicts in disagreements amongst individuals, between individuals and groups, between groups and communities and between countries. Hence conflict situations can be viewed from the both the micro and macro levels. This paper however views conflict from macro level as conceived by Bujra (2002) as a violent struggle between groups and states.

The inevitability of conflicts between groups and states calls for measures towards conflict management or conflict resolution. Historically, there existed indigenous conflict resolution processes in indigenous African communities. These were part of a well-structured, time-proven social system geared towards long lasting sustainable reconciliation, maintenance and improvement of psychosocial relationships (Kwaku & Morena, 2023). The methods, processes and regulations are deeply rooted in the customs and traditions of peoples of diverse African cultures. The importance and utility of the processes lie in the fact that they strive “to restore a balance, to settle conflict and eliminate disputes” (Choudree, 1999:1). Those who indigenous conflict mechanisms are also more at ease in a familiar environment, where the justice and peace mechanisms are acceptable by affected persons and they believe this will lead sustainable psychosocial wellbeing. Psychosocial wellbeing within African communities is valuable because it is holistic. It addresses the physical, social and spiritual aspects of life, whence conflict resolution mechanisms are anchored for sustainable justice and peace between communities. Psychosocial wellbeing entails the sustainable use of physical environment, plants, and animals for economic and play activities including respecting human dignity and differences, encouraging inclusion. Psychosocial wellbeing promotes family hood philosophy of living and working together as well as spiritual beliefs and worship of Supreme Being, deities and ancestors, encompassing socially accepted moral values and norms such as respect, honesty, generosity, diligence (Tchombe, 2016). Hence, once societies were in conflict, the goal of the community leaders was to restore order and a return to normalcy through the use of conflict resolution strategies that were acceptable to all opposing parties.

The paper therefore argues that current methods of conflict resolution are not sustainable because they do not build long lasting psychosocial wellbeing of those affected during conflict situation. Such is the case many armed conflicts that are common to all continents in the world. The continuous call for shallow management strategies are inadequate in addressing the psychosocial wellbeing of communities that include the physical, social, moral and spiritual prosperity of communities emerging from conflict. The end result is often the reoccurrence of the same types of conflicts. On the other hand indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms were more sustainable in not only bringing an end to conflicts but equally preventing future reoccurrence of the same types of conflicts between groups, communities and governments.

State and reoccurrence of protracted conflicts and displacements in Africa

According to Alabi (2006) there is a repeated phenomenon of protracted conflicts in Africa. Since the 1960's we can highlight examples like Sudan (1995-1990); Chad (1965-85); Angola since 1974; Liberia (1980- 2003); Nigeria (1967-70); Somalia (1999-93); and Burundi, Rwanda and Sierra Leone (1991-2001). Apart from these civil wars, there have equally been inter-country disputes within the regions of Africa like the Nigeria- Cameroon dispute over Bakassi peninsular since the

1970's; Algeria- Morocco conflict over the Atlas Mountains area in October 1963; Eritrea-Ethiopian crisis between 1962 and 1979; just to name a few (Barkindo et al, 1994: 279-321, Cook and Killingray, 1983: 183-84; Europa, 1987: 187).

According to the African Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) in 2024 indicates that the current number of Africans who are forcibly displaced has risen over the past year and now totals over 40 million people as a result of conflict situations as represented in table 1.

Table 1: Countries most contributing to forced displacement in Africa

Countries Most Contributing to Forced Displacement in Africa				
Country	IDPs	Refugees and Asylum Seekers	Total	Percentage of Country's Population Displaced
Sudan	6,011,010	1,292,949	7,303,959	16
DRC	6,101,300	1,039,793	7,141,093	7
Somalia	4,395,000	739,298	5,134,298	29
South Sudan	1,490,064	2,321,994	3,812,058	42
Nigeria	3,578,996	403,887	3,982,883	2
Ethiopia	3,143,255	279,412	3,422,667	3
Burkina Faso	2,062,534	73,941	2,136,475	9
CAR	485,825	753,324	1,239,149	22
Cameroon	1,066,254	141,108	1,207,362	4
Mozambique	834,304	8,685	842,989	3
Mali	375,539	220,695	596,234	3
Eritrea	n/a	587,301	587,301	16
Chad	381,289	17,216	398,505	2
Niger	358,185	23,743	381,928	1
Burundi	8,177	333,794	341,971	3
Total Displaced in Africa:			40,398,156	

Source: African Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) in 2024

Critique of current conflict resolution mechanisms in Africa

The critical problem raised by this paper is the difficulty in bring long lasting solutions to conflicts in Africa because the conflict resolution actors are foreign to the continent and propagate the idea of peace and conflict resolution corresponding mainly to their own interests and not the interested of those in the continent. Recognizing and addressing these primary drivers of protracted conflicts, therefore, is critical to alleviating the observable symptoms of record numbers of forcibly displaced people. It is therefore necessary to acknowledge the fact that current mechanisms of conflict resolution seem not to foster the psychosocial wellbeing of displaced persons and that may be the reason why the conflicts continue to protract or will reoccur in the future in Africa.

According to Fonkem (2013), there are two emerging trends in regard to conflict resolution in Africa that continue to contribute to poor psychosocial wellbeing. In the first case the actors that are engaged in conflict resolution in Africa are often coming out of Africa. The issue with these external interventions is that they bring in conflict intervention mechanisms that are alien to African cultural patterns with short term solutions that do not follow the African sustainable philosophies and psychology of socialism. This inevitably leads to conflict management rather than conflict resolution. Instead of raising of fundamental issues for a long lasting solutions, attention is rather concentrated on ameliorating the symptoms of the conflict, and in this way reducing suffering (Ryan 1990). For various selfish interests of the external actors involved, only temporal solutions are offered giving room for future occurrences and protraction in conflicts.

Emerging psychosocial implications of protracted conflicts in Africa

The emerging psychosocial implications of protracted conflicts in Africa from our discussions above are based on what could term a corollary of armed conflict on human development. These implications hold that conflict-affected settings are often sites of intense adversity and stress particularly on displaced persons. Armed conflicts, forced displacement, as well as the chronic stress of trying to make ends meet in conflict-affected settings, take their toll on the mind, body, spirit and human development in general. As the impacts of such stressful experiences accumulate, they hinder an individual's ability to engage in education, economic and social life. On the collective level, chronic stress makes it hard for people, families, and communities to trust one another and come together to realise common goals. Insecurity and violence in conflict affected settings have forced people to flee their homes, with serious consequences on livelihoods and living conditions (Tchombe, 2019).

Many of the conflict-hit population/vulnerable persons (mostly children and women) are suffering from severe physical, physiological and social stress. Accordingly, vulnerable persons during times of crisis need urgent assistance and physiopsychosocial care in terms of needs such as good nutrition, education, shelter, clothing, healthcare, portable water, sanitation/hygiene, counselling and rehabilitation services. The increasing psychosocial needs require sustainable interventions especially with the grave problems of insecurity and inaccessibility of certain areas (Tchombe, Nsamenang, & Lah, 2013)

Indigenous mechanisms of sustainable conflict resolution in Africa

African social philosophies like the *Ubuntu* and *Ujama'a* are a collection of values and practices of living and working together that African people view as making people and their communities authentic. While the nuances of these values and practices vary across different ethnic groups, they all point to one thing – an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world (Kaunda, 2007). This underpins that conflict resolution in indigenous African communities is founded in restoring the communal good of everyone as opposed to satisfying individual motives of self-gratification. The underpinning policies and orientations towards conflict resolution mechanisms in African communities favour equality and equity. The communal lifestyle of indigenous people was defined as the collective philosophy of living together, working together, and sharing each other's joys and sorrows. It is the nucleus of the African thought system (Wirdze et al, 2011).

The onus of conflict resolution in African communities was therefore based on the mechanism of inclusion of both parties and communities involved in the dispute. Conflict resolution builds on the principle that justice and peace can only be defined as a product of social construction. The morality of self-interest is highly discouraged in favour of acting for the common good and psychosocial wellbeing of all. Reflecting on the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, Kaunda (2007) highlights eight basic mechanisms that could be harnessed for sustainable conflict resolution in Africa:

- The human person at the centre of life: The human being is not defined according to his colour, nation, religion, creed, political leanings, material contribution or any matter.
- The dignity of the human person: Humanism teaches us to be considerate to our fellow humans in all we say and do.
- Non-exploitation: There shall be impartiality in the treatment of both parties in a conflict situation
- Equal opportunities for all, non-discrimination: Humanism seeks to create a society of respect for everyone no matter social status and class
- Hard work and self-reliance: All humans should have the opportunity towards self-reliance through hard work.

- Working together: The African society is communal in spirit where people work and live together for the good of each other.
- The extended family: Extension of family ties goes beyond territorial boundaries.
- Loyalty and patriotism: The love for one's community will prevent thoughts of harming other communities
- Spiritual connectedness: The human being is connected to one ancestral livelihood. Solutions and prevention of further conflicts will culminate in traditional sacrifices to appease God and plead to intimate reconciliation. Communities will share food and drink together as a spiritual sign that they are bound together and will not engage in future conflicts.

The philosophy of inclusion, therefore, reiterates that access for all informs that institutions have the potential to support anyone to have a full and worthwhile life. For conflict resolution to succeed we need useful philosophical principles of togetherness (*Ubuntu and Ujama'a*) to direct inclusive culture in practices when conflicts emerge. Belongingness refers to a human emotional need for interpersonal relationships, affiliating, connectedness, and being part of a group. Indications of conflict resolution include trust, acceptance, receiving and giving, affection, and being connected. To achieve this requires cooperation and collaboration as important ways to fulfill belongingness needs. From an African philosophical position, belongingness guarantees the expression justice and peace (Onebunne, 2020).

Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated the importance of indigenous mechanisms in sustainable conflict resolution and peacebuilding among cultures in Africa. It is evident that most conflicts in Africa to continue to protract there is need for a shift in preference for indigenous conflict resolution processes in Africa because they are based on cultural concepts, values, and procedures that are understood and accepted by African communities. People are familiar with their cultural dictates and therefore it is easier to come to grips with responsibilities that emanate from them. It is in this context that the principles of social cohesion, harmony, openness/transparency, participation, peaceful co-existence, respect, tolerance and humility, among others, are emphasized as core issues in indigenous conflict resolution amongst African cultures. Indigenous methods of conflict resolution have proven to be more effective and efficient than the imported methods. Hence most Africans are now calling for African conflicts to be solved by Africans, using African mechanisms.

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