RETHINKING CHRONIC CRISSES IN AFRICA: GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In many of Africa’s conflict-affected areas, violence has caused immense suffering among local communities for years, if not decades. International responses to these chronic crises are often reactive or too focused on political elites at the highest levels, while national governments across the continent often utilize securitized responses that only temporarily stop the violence. While these approaches can be valuable under certain circumstances, they have been inadequate, and more effort is needed to promote and improve peacebuilding initiatives that prevent violence over the long-term.

To that end, on March 2020 in Washington DC, Search for Common Ground (Search) and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) convened a high-level conference that brought together African scholars, practitioners, and American policymakers to discuss the latest conflict dynamics in Africa, and how to use peacebuilding as an effective tool in breaking pernicious cycles of violence on the continent. This reflection paper summarizes three major areas that conference participants felt were inadequately integrated into existing peace and security initiatives: 1) a nuanced view of gender’s role in conflict, 2) policies, programs, and funding streams that enable better responses to the transnational dimensions of conflict, and 3) improving local partnerships and transition plans for enduring change. Additionally, the paper highlights two case studies of successful peacebuilding that touch on some of these identified gaps: Search’s early warning/early response architecture to protect civilians against Boko Haram and other violence in Northeast Nigeria, and the indigenous Gbaya women peacebuilders who helped prevent the eruption of violence in the Cameroon-Central African Republic borderlands.

Finally, to help address the major gaps in peace and security initiatives, and drawing on the lessons from the case studies, this paper provides six key recommendations for international and national-level actors:

1. **Adopt a more comprehensive gender lens that goes beyond “women’s issues” and examines gender norms for all gender identities and how these shape violent conflict.**

2. **Support national governments, regional bodies, and international agencies in designing common international standards and interorganizational coordination plans to address transnational conflict dynamics.**

3. **Promote a cross-border approach to peacebuilding that reduces country-based silos in organizational structures and program implementation.**

4. **Prioritize engaging local actors, including actors outside of local NGOs and governments, to generate violence prevention solutions with broad community buy-in.**

5. **Hold international humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding initiatives accountable to developing and implementing transition plans to increase the sustainability of positive changes.**

6. **Strengthen the linkages between Africa-based scholarship and locally produced knowledge with national, regional, and international policymaking and practitioner communities.**
INTRODUCTION

The nature of violent conflict is changing across the world. Since the end of World War II, an international system of alliances, arms controls, multilateral fora, and trade, among others, has helped avert potential wars between nation-states. However, over the past few decades, violent conflict has shifted away from large interstate wars to conflicts within nation-states or in weak state contexts where governments are unable to maintain peace and security within their territories. In these contexts, non-state armed groups such as terrorist organizations and insurgents have proliferated. Many international violence prevention frameworks still primarily operate through government-to-government diplomacy – a dangerously inadequate approach for areas where governments are absent, weak, or seen as illegitimate by citizens.

The tendency to work exclusively through governments and to respond reactively has made international and national responses to conflicts in Africa less effective. Many of the current violent conflicts have raged for years and several decades, including the Jihadist insurgencies in Nigeria, Mali, Chad, and Niger, as well as civil wars in Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan. These complex conflicts have left large numbers of people dead, displaced, or living under chronic crisis conditions, threatened by a deadly combination of violence, food insecurity, abject poverty, and destroyed livelihoods. Such conditions in turn weaken societies’ resilience and create fertile grounds for armed actors to proliferate, creating a vicious cycle.

For governments, international organizations, and donors who seek to support international peace and security, these chronic crises demand a fundamental rethinking of approaches to break the cycles of violence. One such approach is violence prevention through locally-rooted peacebuilding, which focuses on engaging ordinary citizens at the grassroots level to rebuild inclusive and just political, economic, security, and social institutions.\(^1\) The cost-effectiveness of such initiatives serves many of these actors’ strategic interests: research has shown that each $1 spent on proactive peacebuilding will save up to $16 that would otherwise be spent on containing violence, such as through military action against armed actors, or lost through the destruction that wars cause.\(^2\) In the last few years, there have been encouraging signs that major actors on the international stage are heeding this logic. In the U.S., legislation called the Global Fragility Act was recently passed; the law mandates that the U.S. Departments of State and Defense articulate a strategy for violence prevention in key at-risk countries, and creates funding streams for on-the-ground civil society organizations to conduct peacebuilding work. The World Bank Group has also released its new strategy for fragile and conflict-affected situations, with a strong emphasis on using development tools to prevent future outbreaks of violence.\(^3\)

The U.S., multilateral bodies, and regional organizations are also considering several other policy reform

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2. Ibid, 3.
processes that will affect diplomatic, humanitarian, and development assistance to fragile and conflict-affected states in Africa. These reforms are particularly important because they can link top-down processes for promoting peace with bottom-up input, mobilization, and support. This vertically integrated model of peacebuilding is critical because no one approach on its own can succeed. Whilst top-down solutions such as mediation, peacekeeping missions, treaties, legal changes, and new funding streams bring considerable resources to bear, they are bound to be ineffective without the input and buy-in of grassroots constituents who possess deep contextual understandings of violent conflicts. On the other hand, grassroots efforts are also unlikely to succeed without the resources and networks to scale up, coordinate amongst different constituents, and institutionalize changes. Whom these reform processes will prioritize as partners for assistance, as well as how the partnerships will be implemented, will have significant implications for the likelihood of ending Africa’s chronic crises.

To rethink international policy frameworks and practices for addressing such chronic crises, Search and the SSRC organized a joint conference in March 2020, bringing together leading African scholars and American policymakers to discuss how the latest research can better support vertically integrated peacebuilding and help explore new options. The scholars were Titilope Ajayi from the University of Ghana, Dr. Christelle Djouldé Amina from the University of Ngaoundéré, Cameroon, and Dr. Pamela Chepngetich from Kisii University, Kenya. All scholars were formerly fellows with the SSRC’s African Peacebuilding Network (APN) program, and their individual research papers, policy briefs, and reflection pieces are available for further reading.  

This reflection paper synthesizes the scholars’ research findings, the discussion points during the conference and advocacy visits, as well as Search’s on-the-ground experience leading conflict transformation in twenty-three African countries for over two decades. It first argues that three major gaps need to be addressed through ongoing policy reform processes: (a) the multifaceted role of gender in conflict, (b) the transnational dimensions of conflicts, and (c) creating sustainable change through meaningful local partnerships. Next, it provides two illustrative case studies on possible models for addressing the gaps: an early warning/early response mechanism in Northeast Nigeria, and indigenous peacemaking rituals by Gbay women in Cameroon and the Central African Republic (CAR). Last, the paper provides governments, international organizations, and donors with strategic recommendations for supporting effective conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

### Major Gaps in Addressing Chronic Crises

International, regional, and national actors have invested significant resources to address various needs stemming from security and humanitarian crises in African countries and communities facing chronically
violent conflicts. These resources are mobilized to address issues such as violent conflict, food security, livelihoods, reconciliation, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), mediation, and protection of civilians, among other topics. In addition to these, presentations and discussions during the conference highlighted the importance of three often under examined dimensions of chronic crises. Indeed, these dimensions underpin many humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding concerns and initiatives. This section covers three such dimensions. While these gaps are far from exhaustive, numerous conference participants consistently identified them as pressing priorities.

Gender

The intersection of gender and conflict has long been a major topic for researchers. Undeniably, practitioners and policymakers alike have also acknowledged the importance of examining gender in conflict situations - a linkage most famously asserted in 2000 by the passing of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 that launched the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. The resolution urged all actors to “adopt a gender perspective that included the special needs of women and girls during repatriation and resettlement, rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction.” Since then, 69 countries have implemented national WPS action plans, with the U.S. passing a WPS Act in 2017, mandating a government-wide strategy for increasing women’s participation in security processes.\(^6\)

Despite these achievements, experts note that progress has stalled, and significant challenges remain. Recent years have witnessed a steady rise in political violence directed towards politically active women, while in 2018, under 20 percent of parliamentary seats in post-conflict countries were occupied by women, despite women making up around half of the population in these contexts.\(^7\) The significant societal barriers and violence that women who exercise their agency face are symptomatic of a systematic tendency to view women as victims or passive subjects in crises situations; women are viewed almost exclusively as beneficiaries of intervention programs, ignoring their fluid and multifaceted roles. For instance, in Kenya’s Dadaab refugee complex – the third largest in the world – photographic representations of the refugee populations are highly gendered. In Chepngetich’s research on depictions of Dadaab’s refugee population, she finds that national and international mass media often selectively promote a narrative of refugees’ suffering and looming crises, neglecting the agency and optimism of many refugees. A common tactic for this narrative is to capture images of refugee mothers and children looking destitute and fatherless. Chepngetich finds that the frequent absence of an able-bodied adult male in such images places the focus

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squarely on the notion of female helplessness amid the seemingly insurmountable challenges brought about by war.\(^9\)

Women’s visual suffering is equated with the devastating aftermath of war, ignoring the multiple and critical roles that women play in perpetuating, and mitigating violent conflicts.\(^10\) Ajayi’s research on the Boko Haram insurgency in Northeast Nigeria clearly highlights the diverse roles women play in conflict. While many scholars and policymakers view female Boko Haram recruits as having been abducted or coerced, Ajayi finds that there are some women who join the insurgent group voluntarily in pursuit of increased personal freedom and social status. Indeed, Ajayi observes that some of these women occasionally occupy senior positions in the Boko Haram hierarchy, even obtaining education through the group’s resources and commanding junior male recruits.\(^11\) Another overlooked role that women play is as policewomen in the Nigerian Police Force (NPF). These women are often important focal points for women in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps who want to report sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), but they themselves must often endure sexual harassment from senior male officers.\(^12\) In many cases, women are also taking the lead in organizing grassroots initiatives to promote peace and tolerance. For example, Search’s research and programming in South Sudan have demonstrated women’s agency. In Mingkaman, Lakes State, which had a high level of SGBV, women played an active role in participatory theater, where regular community members discussed tolerance and women’s issues through the characters and plotlines they acted out on stage. Evaluations that the ability to explore different people’s perspectives helped contribute to a decrease in rape and domestic violence, as well as an increase in the number of women being allowed to pursue education and employment opportunities.\(^13\) Last, it also greatly increased community members’ understanding of non-violent conflict resolution skills.\(^14\)

Ironically, the disproportionate focus on women as victims has not caused aid and other protection programs to adequately address the acute risks that women face in conflict-affected areas: globally, only 28 percent of humanitarian needs overviews provided substantive analysis on how crises differentially impacted women, girls, men, and boys.\(^15\) Ajayi’s research on women in internal displacement camps in Northeast Nigeria reveals many unmet protection needs. These include poor mental health care, SGBV that women experience while undergoing routine tasks outside the camps, difficulties in accessing justice when the army or police silence women who report SGBV committed by security actors, and trouble adapting to their new roles as breadwinners when the male household head is absent.\(^16\)

A major barrier to better addressing issues of gender and conflict lies in the difficulties of implementing and

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\(^10\) Ibid, 101.


\(^12\) Ibid, 7.


\(^14\) Ibid, 13

\(^15\) United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General, 2.

\(^16\) Ajayi, Broadening the Debate, 4-8.
operationalizing the WPS framework at the national and international levels.\textsuperscript{17} As a signatory to the UNSCR 1325, Nigeria is required to implement national action plans (NAP) for WPS every three years. Its first NAP in 2013 played a critical role in localizing the WPS agenda and pushing through legislation to protect victims of sexual assault in areas where Sharia law clash with the Nigerian criminal code. However, Nigeria’s NAPs have been plagued by piecemeal buy-in and funding from local and state governments, a rigid framework that does not take into account contextual changes in women’s experiences in the Boko Haram crisis, and an overemphasis on obtaining benchmarks and performance indicators, rather than influencing the gender biases among the country’s security and political institutions.\textsuperscript{18}

However, an even more fundamental shortcoming of the WPS agenda is that it tends to generate programs and policies that narrowly focus on women’s experiences in conflict. While such initiatives are critical, the role of gender must be examined more broadly to include the norms and principles related to all gender identities, and how these norms intersect with one another. Especially important are concepts of masculinity that play a role in exacerbating violence. As Ajayi notes, one problem with the WPS agenda’s “add women and stir” approach to improving security processes is that it ignores broader gendered norms that limit women’s empowerment. Within the families living in IDP camps in Northeast Nigeria, male household members who feel emasculated because they can no longer earn a living sometimes redirect their anger towards their wives in order to feel in charge. In other cases, humanitarian aid that is primarily given to women can further erode their husbands’ sense of masculinity, prompting the husbands to use violence to re-assert authority.\textsuperscript{19} In such cases, programs that simplistically seek to empower women via economic independence or political activity, for instance, can encounter harmful pushback unless such programs are paired with efforts to openly discuss what it means to be and act like a man.

In Africa, another critical way that male gender norms shape violent conflict is that male youths’ social recognition into male adulthood often requires that they be financially secure, own a home, and be married. Moreover, marriage itself often requires a brideprice which the male youth must provide to the bride’s family. In contexts where young men are marginalized from socio-economic and political decision-making processes, lack material resources, and where bride prices are facing inflationary pressures, the inability of young men to obtain their society’s recognition of adulthood often creates incentives to look for social recognition and material support elsewhere, including through joining violent armed groups.\textsuperscript{20}

In Northeast Nigeria, the Boko Haram insurgency incentivizes recruits by offering to organize inexpensive weddings. In recent years, the group has given out kidnapped young women as “wives” for male recruits.\textsuperscript{21} In South Sudan, where cattle is a widely-accepted currency for brideprice and other transactions, the rising amounts needed to pay off the brideprice have led to increased cattle rustling among young men who

\textsuperscript{18} Ajayi, Broadening the Debate, 16.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 5
cannot afford brideprices on their own.\textsuperscript{22} Cattle rustling in turn creates a cycle of reprisal attacks between the cattle’s original owners and the cattle raiders or their family as well, drastically increasing the use of violence.

The examples in this section highlight the need for intervention initiatives to understand, in a nuanced way, broader systems of gender norms and societal expectations that shape attitudes, behaviors, and needs of people of all gender identities in conflict settings. Failure to do so will likely result in overlooking key opportunities to build peace. As such, high-level policy frameworks on gender must be informed by deep knowledge of how gender is understood locally, and must be implemented in a manner that is sensitive to variations between different local contexts.

**Transnational Dimensions of Conflict**

Within Search, our 10-year strategic plan will see the organization replace its country-office model for programs to one that is centered on 10 transnational “conflict geographies” around the world. In Africa, five conflict geographies have been identified: the Lake Chad Basin, the Sahel, Central Africa, the Sudans, and the Horn of Africa. This approach is motivated by the reality that conflict systems are not delimited by national boundaries, but by their own shifting and porous boundaries.\textsuperscript{23} Operationally, the conflict geographies model therefore allows Search to more flexibly adapt programming and allocate resources across borders in order to better address some of the transnational dimensions of conflict. A similar discussion on changing policy and programming models among peer organizations and governmental agencies is long overdue.

Like the role of gender in conflict, experts have long acknowledged that the drivers and impact of violent conflict across Africa transcend the national boundaries of countries. However, many international or regional prevention and response mechanisms still operate in country-based siloes that hinder coordination, collaboration, and movement of resources across borders. Where international cooperation to tackle transnational conflict dynamics do occur, such as through multilateral peacekeeping forces, it often happens under the framework of state sovereignty, restricting programs to the political boundaries of a country or privileging official state actors and institutions over informal or grassroots groups who may be valuable partners in addressing cross-border chronic crises.

In many conflict-affected settings, a major transnational effect of conflict is the flow of refugees who flee their home countries in search of safety and livelihoods. Northeast Nigeria’s Boko Haram insurgency, which has now affected the region for more than a decade, has caused hundreds of thousands of Nigerians to seek refuge in neighboring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, while millions more have been internally displaced within Nigeria.\textsuperscript{24} At the same time, these neighboring countries are already plagued by insecurity, both

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 31-34.
because Boko Haram has established a presence in Chad and Niger and because many host areas had already faced chronic poverty and food insecurity, making them unable to provide for refugees’ needs. Coordination between a motley group of local and international actors has been poor, especially between the Nigerian government and international humanitarian actors. This further exacerbates the situation around the Lake Chad Basin.\(^2^5\)

Similarly, Chepngetich argues that Somali refugees in Kenya’s Dadaab refugee complex have in recent years been the subject of deep suspicion and belligerence by Kenyan officials, media elites, and host communities. Despite their longstanding presence since 1991, Somali refugees still evoke fears of a possible infiltration campaign into Kenya by the Somali terrorist group, al-Shabaab. Since 2016 this has fueled a fierce debate on closing Dadaab.\(^2^6\) In conflict-affected contexts, there is a significant need for coordination across national borders in order to prevent conflicts between migrant and host-communities.

The movements of people across borders themselves may spread conflict into new areas and countries and complicate response efforts. The violent extremist group, al-Shabaab, has used ethnic and cultural ties to Somalis in Kenya to recruit members into the organization and infiltrate the Northern provinces of Kenya. These dynamics spread the geographic reach of al-Shabaab’s violence, and foment tensions between Kenyan Somalis, Somali refugees, and other ethnic groups in Kenya.\(^2^7\) In the Sahel, Jihadist fighters have frequently used Central Mali as a launching point for attacks in Burkina Faso; Boko Haram’s presence in Niger’s Diffa region has led to a cycle of violence as the government and insurgent group engage in series of reprisal attacks. Additionally, competition for dwindling supplies of land and natural resources in the context of ungoverned spaces has led to the violent escalation of conflict between sedentary farmers and nomadic herders across the region.\(^2^8\)

In many cases, useful international frameworks for tackling the common causes and effects of conflict exist, but their potential to prevent conflict becomes limited when individual member states fail to fully operationalize and implement these frameworks. For instance, member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have since 1998 adopted a protocol setting out norms and common frameworks for governing the movement of nomadic herders across national boundaries. Proper management of international transhumance could help manage the competition for resources that have recently led to violence. However, most national governments have not fully adopted or institutionalized the protocol.\(^2^9\) Similarly, the African Union in 2007 adopted the Great Green Wall Initiative (GGWI) to counter the environmental harms of deforestation and reduce climate change, but adherence to the Initiative’s plans of


\(^{27}\) Ibid; Search for Common Ground, “Horn of Africa Strategy” (unpublished internal document, 2020).


\(^{29}\) Kwaja and Smith, Transnational Dimensions, 16.
action has been piecemeal throughout the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin.\textsuperscript{30} As climate change threatens to fuel violent conflict by disrupting people’s livelihoods, and options amid intensifying resource competition, an initiative like the GGWI will become increasingly important to peace and security. Increased coordination among governments to enact and implement cross-border solutions to violence is clearly needed.

Where government-to-government coordination on critical issues may be absent, there is nonetheless a valuable opportunity for international donors and organizations to support non-state or informal groups in tackling transnational conflict dynamics. Doing so will require complementing country-based models for grantmaking and technical support with more flexible models where funds and other resources can be interchanged across multiple country projects. For example, USAID’s Peace Through Development initiative, for which Search was one of the implementers, released $60 million for a project that included connecting youth networks from Burkina Faso, Chad, and Niger, thus developing transnational youth networks for collaboration and knowledge exchange to prevent/counter violent extremism in their communities.\textsuperscript{31} Indeed, there is cause for optimism: assessments of the past and current funding landscape for the Sahel predicts an increase in donor funding for cross-border programs, while the World Bank Group’s recent strategy on Fragility, Conflict, and Violence calls for scaling up its regional and cross-border programs to complement its traditionally country-based approaches.\textsuperscript{32} To better understand and tackle transnational conflict dynamics, such changes will need to become the norm.

Local Partnerships and Sustainable Change

The conference’s second panel, composed of U.S.-based policymakers and senior experts from international NGOs, overwhelmingly emphasized the importance of ensuring that all projects to promote peace and security have substantive ownership by local communities. Specifically, speakers emphasized the need to promote locally led solutions, as well as responsible models of transition when interventions by non-local actors must be handed off to local groups to sustain.

The emphasis on locally led solutions stems from the reality that, as outsiders, international or even national actors often do not understand the needs of local communities to the same degree as the residents who have the necessary context-specific experiences and social connections to be effective peacemakers. Local partnerships extend beyond occasional dialogues with state institutions of a country or providing financial and other technical resources to a local branch of international- or national-level NGOs. It must also take into account the perspectives of less formal grassroots institutions, groups, and individuals such as youth groups, traditional leadership structures, religious actors, and marginalized populations who may be overlooked by state institutions or mainstream civil society organizations. In many cases, these grassroots actors are already leading effective peacebuilding efforts in their communities amid challenging chronic

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} International Relief and Development, “Final Performance Report of USAID Peace through Development II (PDev II) 2011- 2016” (International Relief and Development), 10.
\textsuperscript{32} World Bank Group, Strategy, 17.
crises. Djouldé’s work on the Gbaya women of eastern Cameroon and western CAR highlights this point. In response to rising political conflict and violence between farmers and herders in both countries, the *Soré Nga’a Mo’o*, ritual conducted by female Gbaya elders has been adapted to serve as an important conflict de-escalation tool. As will be described in more detail later in this paper, Djouldé finds the ritual to be effective in resolving numerous conflicts; she further argues that in Cameroon, many ethnic groups have pre-existing peacemaking rituals led by women. These findings illustrate “the point that conflict resolution in Africa should not only be based exclusively on models imported from outside the continent…but include endogenous approaches to peacebuilding.”

The ability to amplify the successes of local peacebuilding efforts is particularly important for exit plans for non-local project implementers or funders. One conference panelist noted that the U.S. Department of State’s ongoing Security Assistance Review aims to make stabilization an inherently transitional process, where collaboration with accountable local partners will help prevent the reemergence of violence. Another panelist argued that while U.S. foreign assistance should not be eliminated, communities’ dependency on foreign assistance needs to be reduced. Indeed, successful transitions should be a critical component of donor governments’ foreign assistance strategies. In these situations, partnering with local peacebuilders and leveraging existing peacebuilding institutions and traditions can help facilitate an effective transition that prevents the resurgence of violence.

Less attention has been devoted to examining best practices for transitioning programs and initiatives to local ownership. To address this gap, a consortium consisting of CDA Collaborative Learning, Peace Direct, and Search recently completed a three-year project examining case studies of transitions from INGOs to local organizations in several sectors, including governance, micro-finance, and peacebuilding, among others. This project, called *Stopping as Success*, used case studies from Africa to highlight several lessons from successful transitions. A key takeaway is that transition planning should be a substantial component of project design from the onset and not merely a “check the box” exercise. However, the lack of an initial exit strategy can be overcome through consistent coordination with local partners.

Moreover, investing in the capacities of local partners and in less tangible processes was critical to sustained progress. In Kenya, an economic development project run by INGO Nuru International successfully turned over to a local NGO in 2015. Key to the sustainability of the project was that Nuru International prioritized mentoring local staff and partners from the outset; Nuru International’s provision of funding was also adequately flexible, creating a safe and supportive environment for local partners to fail, innovate, and experiment. This in turn allowed local partners to determine the most effective ways for sustaining the positive change. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the INGO International Rescue Committee

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34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Tracy Dexter, “Case Study: PADCO Burundi” (*Stopping As Success*, 2018).
(IRC) implemented several projects to improve public service delivery for citizens and rebuild damaged infrastructure. There is strong initial evidence that the positive changes brought about by the project have been sustained well after 2016, when the IRC ended its involvement in the projects in 2016. The transition lacked a single “successor” organization to coordinate the projects after the IRC’s exit; ownership over some activities was handed to a motley group of local government bodies. Nonetheless, this transition was successful because the IRC had prioritized building the capacity of non-governmental groups and training communities on accountability processes. As a result, public authorities were more responsive to citizen’s service delivery needs, and communities felt empowered to demand more transparency from public authorities. This suggests that “while building service delivery infrastructure is a core part of locally led development, less tangible elements – such as reinforcing existing social accountability mechanisms – can be equally important, especially in the medium- to long-term.”

CASE STUDIES OF SUCCESSFUL PEACEBUILDING

No single peacebuilding project or group will be able to address all the gaps in current approaches to tackling chronic crises. Doing so will require a coordinated multisectoral and multi-stakeholder effort. Nonetheless, the following case studies offer valuable insights into successful local peacebuilding and elements therein that could be scaled up or replicated. The Early Warning/Early Response case highlights one model of building collaborative partnerships with and among local actors, successful transition, and vertical integration between local and strategic responses to violence. The Gbaya women case highlights both the important role women play in peacebuilding and what addressing the transnational dimensions of violent conflict might look like.

Early Warning and Early Response in Northeast Nigeria

With nearly 40,000 people killed and 2.5 million displaced since 2011 because of the Boko Haram insurgency, the need for civilian protection in Northeast Nigeria is high. The ensuing instability has in turn led to an uptick in other forms of violence, including criminality and sectarian conflicts. Between July 2015 and July 2019, Search coordinated an Early Warning/Early Response (EWER) system in 12 Local Government Areas (LGAs) across Adamawa and Borno states. The system was designed to protect civilians from violence by Boko Haram and other armed actors through proactively addressing risk factors that make local communities unable to settle disputes peacefully. Evaluations of the EWER system showed that residents of communities where the system operated felt that these community-driven approaches to resolving conflicts improved peace and security considerably.

38 Farzana Ahmed, Arlette Nyembo, and Alex Martins, “Program Transition at the Community Level: International Rescue Committee’s Tuungane Program in the Democratic Republic of Congo” (Stopping as Success, 2019).
39 Ibid, 16.
41 A local government area in Nigeria is roughly equal to a county, or a prefecture.
The system was centered on three levels of committees: a state-level committee for each of the two states, an LGA-level committee for each of the 12 targeted LGAs, and a community-level committee for each of the 55 chosen communities across the 12 LGAs. Committees included a diverse range of existing stakeholders: traditional, religious, youth, and women leaders; security forces (police, military, and civilian militias); and representatives of other government bodies, such as the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). The purpose was to build on each participant’s unique capabilities and relationships to respond to emerging security threats in a holistic manner. During committee meetings, members were responsible for identifying potential triggers of violence and proposing action plans to address them, including through using conflict transformation and threat identification skills taught at Search training sessions. Local traditional leaders played a critical role as first responders and detectors of warning signs; most early warning signs were identified and discussed first at the community-level committees. However, community-level committees might forward early warning information to the LGA’s EWER committee if the issues were beyond the community-level committee’s capacity to resolve, and the LGA-level committee sometimes then forwarded the problems to the state-level committee if state-wide actions or legislations were needed.

Different levels of committees were thus linked vertically, enabling the perspectives of those directly affected by violence in communities to inform higher-level strategic responses. In Maiduguri City in Borno State, drivers of public transportation were frequently involved in criminality and dangerous driving behaviors while on the road – a problem that led to violence and traffic-related deaths. After reports came in from community-level committees, the Borno state-level committee in September 2018 coordinated the unification of six state-wide drivers’ associations, creating a common set of standards to govern the behavior of each association’s drivers. This helped curb the dangerous behavior by drivers in Maiduguri and helped reduce death and violence.42 In March 2018, communities throughout Mubi North LGA in Adamawa state experienced violent clashes between Muslims and Christians. After receiving reports from community-level observers, the LGA-committee sought the assistance of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council to convene dialogues between religious leaders across the LGA. Persistent dialogues led to a de-escalation of the conflict and more collaborative relationships between different faith groups, such that Muslims participated in guarding churches against potential attacks from armed Muslim groups, while Christians similarly defended mosques against violent Christian groups.43

Another reason for the system’s success was that it focused on partnering with institutions that already existed within communities and on building trust among them, rather than creating wholly new institutions or organizations to which people would need to adapt. Committee meetings provided members with the initial time and space to develop working relationships with stakeholders with whom they rarely interacted. Subsequently, committee members gradually became more comfortable calling on each other to help resolve problems whenever they emerged, including in-between committee meetings. For instance, leading up to the February 2019 federal elections, groups of young unemployed men began meeting at set times and

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42 “Internal Learning Document, Search for Common Ground – Nigeria, 2018” (unpublished internal document); Interview with Maiduguri LGA-Committee Chair, September 2019.
43 Interview with Adamawa EWER Coordinator, June 2020.
locations in Jiddari community. Concerned that the groups might engage in crime or electoral violence, the Jiddari committee members quickly pooled their own funds and worked with local small business owners to create temporary jobs for the youth, thus taking the men off the streets at a critical juncture. This kind of local-level collaboration helped create a network of peace supporters within and across communities, ensuring that peacebuilding and conflict de-escalation became part of communities’ organic and self-initiated responses to conflict, rather than an imposed system.

A particularly important type of these horizontal partnerships was the EWER system’s ability to hold security actors accountable to community members and civilian authorities in new and more consistent ways. Government institutions such as the police and the drug enforcement agency often used committee meetings to solicit honest feedback from community members. The EWER coordinators also partnered with Nigeria’s NHRC, army, and grassroots leaders to reduce the army’s abuse of power against citizens. LGA-level and state-level committee meetings became valuable opportunities for civilian community leaders to present senior military commanders with evidence that their troops had committed human rights abuses in Borno and Adamawa states. Commanders then investigated and sanctioned their personnel as appropriate. Indeed, the communities’ ability to hold security forces accountable via the committees was critical to building the trust needed for collective security: among people who faced threats from insurgents, the percentage of those who chose to report warning signs to appropriate authorities nearly tripled, from 15 percent to 42 percent, over the course of 2017 to 2019.

The EWER system’s ability to establish partnerships and trust among local stakeholders and vertically link local responses with more systematic change made it a valuable model for preventing violence. After close collaboration with EWER committee members from civil society, in September 2018 the Adamawa state government formally took over ownership of Search’s EWER architecture. A bill was formally ratified to establish the Adamawa State Peace, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency, which was the state’s first agency covering peacebuilding. While initially designed to be a peace commission reporting to one of Adamawa’s line ministries, consistent advocacy by EWER committee members helped ensure that the bill established a peace agency which directly reports to Adamawa’s governor and has an office physically located in the governor’s building. As a government body, the Agency has gathered enough resources and scaled EWER committees into all 21 LGAs in Adamawa state, ensuring that the state-level response architecture is well informed by local analysis from all parts of the state. This was particularly effective during the February 2019 elections, where simmering tensions in communities heightened the risks of electoral violence. The Agency established a “Situation Room” in the state capital, which liaised with LGAs-level committees who in turn liaised with community-level committees in real time. The Agency then collated information coming from the ground and directed police and civil defense to communities

44 Interview with National Human Rights Commission official, September 2019.
most at risk of violence, helping prevent potential violence.\textsuperscript{47}

Although Search staff did not initially design the EWER project with a specific transition plan in mind, they worked closely and consistently with other local partners after the EWER committees decided that the Adamawa state government should formally take over ownership. Search’s EWER system’s Adamawa coordinator explains that the governor was particularly supportive of state government ownership because EWER committee members showed a very high level of commitment to the cause, which signaled the potential success of a broader state-owned EWER architecture. The coordinator pointed out that key to the high level of commitment was that committees iteratively reviewed their membership in order to add new perspectives, include previously marginalized groups, build new networks, and replace members who could no longer attend committee meetings.\textsuperscript{48} This helped promote broader buy-in for the EWER system at the community- and LGA-levels, creating a more compelling case for the governor’s office to formally adopt the project.

The Gbaya Women Peacebuilders of Cameroon and the Central African Republic

Sharing a long border with the Central African Republic (CAR), eastern Cameroon has been significantly affected by the ongoing violence in its neighbor. Since late 2012, rivalrous factions in CAR have fought for control of the country and engaged in a cycle of reprisals that has left nearly three million people in acute need of humanitarian assistance.\textsuperscript{49} The conflict has played out along religious lines, with predominantly Muslim fighters from the now-disbanded Séléka fighting forces combatting predominantly Christian fighters from anti-balaka coalitions. The intense violence has caused immense destruction and displacement of CAR’s populations. Eastern Cameroon in particular has experienced a large influx of refugees. To date, nearly 300,000 CAR refugees\textsuperscript{50} – around 5 percent of CAR’s entire population – have sought refuge in Cameroon.

In the CAR-Cameroon borderland region, conflict drivers with religious overtones overlay tensions between host and refugee communities over the use of local resources. The violence from CAR itself has spread into eastern Cameroon, with armed groups from CAR regularly making incursions into Cameroon and engaging in looting, kidnapping, and other forms of violence.\textsuperscript{51} Many host communities are also straining under the added pressure of sustaining a large refugee population, sometimes creating conflict between refugee and host communities that may escalate to violence if left unattended.\textsuperscript{52} Host community members often complain that refugee populations are overtaxing local natural resources, while others complain that refugee communities unfairly receive more aid than the host themselves.\textsuperscript{53} In addition, both Muslims and

\textsuperscript{47} Interview with Adamawa EWER Coordinator, June 2020.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid
\textsuperscript{52} Laura McGrew, Social Cohesion Analysis: Cameroon, (Baltimore: Catholic Relief Services, 2016), 24-5.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
Christian CAR citizens have been displaced into Cameroon, where they sometimes re-create the sectarian
conflicts they had tried to leave behind in CAR; where refugees encounter local Cameroonian communities
who follow a different faith, there have also been reports of simmering conflict between these different faith
groups.\textsuperscript{54}

At the same time, shared identity groups across the Cameroon-CAR border create opportunities to support
peace. For instance, people from the Peuhl, Mboro, and Gbaya ethnic groups can be found both among
the refugees entering from CAR and among host communities in Cameroon.\textsuperscript{55} The common cultures and
heritage that transcend national borders can potentially be an important unifier to foster collaboration in
support of peaceful ways of settling conflict.

In particular, the Gbaya people in CAR and Cameroon have long-established traditions for peacemaking and
dispute resolution. Their \textit{Soré Nga’a mo} is a female institution of peace based on a cultural peacebuilding
ritual performed especially by post-menopausal women.\textsuperscript{56} These “women of peace” are given the names
\textit{Ok'o Nga’a mo} or \textit{Ok'o Pi-Nga’a mo} in the local Gbaya language. The ritual involves the making
of a \textit{Zora} cocktail, consisting of mixing \textit{Soré} leaves with other shrubs, as well as sacred water that has
been used to wash the \textit{Ok'o Nga’a mo}’s vagina. The mixture is then placed in a calabash and sprinkled
across the village and on people, while other participants engage in ritualistic singing and prayers led by
the presiding \textit{Ok'o Nga’a mo}.\textsuperscript{57} As Djouldé notes, these practices are often effectively used for a myriad
of purposes, including resolving conflicts and building peace among the Gbaya, and between them and
their neighbors; legitimizing the authority of village chiefs; performing purifying rituals for villages after
conflict, an epidemic or natural disaster; reconciling former enemies; and consolidating peace in villages,
homes, and even families.\textsuperscript{58}

Fundamentally, the \textit{Soré Nga’a mo} practice highlights the effectiveness of women as peacebuilders in
cultural contexts where women’s perspectives and roles in the community are acknowledged and amplified.
Far from being mere victims of conflict, as women are commonly portrayed, Djouldé’s research finds that
women peacebuilders were effective because of endogenous cultural norms that revered women as guardians
of the sacred \textit{Soré}, and therefore credible voices on morality and spirituality within their communities.\textsuperscript{59}
Moreover, although traditional African cultural practices of peace are sometimes considered “archaic,”
Djouldé finds that the \textit{Ok’o Nga’a mo} adapt to socio-political developments. Becoming an \textit{Ok’o Nga’a
mo} is an institutionalized practice, where older women of peace train new initiates. However, far from
rigidly adhering to unchanging beliefs, Djouldé finds that Gbaya women can be categorized into different
generations, each having beliefs and practices that are attuned to their generation’s changing context.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Christelle Amina Djouldé, “Tribute to Koko Didi A Woman of Peace (oko'o nga'a mo) in the Gbaya Community in Cameroon, “
mo-in-gbaya-community-cameroon/
\textsuperscript{57} Djouldé, Reflections.
\textsuperscript{58} Djouldé, \textit{Tribute to Koko Didis}.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, 10-4.
doing so, Gbaya women have made important contributions to peace in the borderland region.

The work of Koko Didi, a 125 year-old Gbaya woman of peace who passed away in 2020, illustrates some of these successes during Cameroon’s turbulent transition to democracy in the early 1990s. Leading up to the country’s first multi-party elections (1992 to 1993), ethnic conflict broke out in Meiganga town between the predominantly Christian Gbaya and the predominantly Muslim Fulani. The immediate trigger for the conflict was that each ethnic group supported different political parties, but this occurred against the backdrop of a perennial sense among the Gbaya that the Fulani’s hegemonic tendencies needed to be stopped.

As the central government’s military and diplomatic responses failed, the government called on Koko Didi to perform the Soré Nga’a mo. After the ritual, the Gbaya stopped any further hostilities towards the Fulani – a gesture the Fulani reciprocated. By performing the peacemaking ritual, Koko Didi successfully reconciled the belligerents, defused social tensions, and put an end to the conflict. She also helped to ritually cleanse and purify the post-conflict environment. Koko Didi was also often invited to official ceremonies, such as the launch of electoral campaigns, and development activities, such as commissioning of roads or schools, to perform the Soré Nga’a mo ritual as a means of blessing these initiatives with peaceful futures.

More recently, between 2010 and 2017, Gbaya women of peace played vital roles in working with state officials in de-escalating conflicts involving refugee populations from CAR who fled to Cameroon’s Garoua-Boulaï township. For example, in 2010 and 2011, the Gbaya in the township frequently performed the Soré Nga’a mo ritual to prevent the conflict observed in CAR from penetrating Cameroonian territory. Specifically, Gbaya women leaders used the ritual to mediate disputes between local and refugee populations, successfully averting potential violence. The ability of the Soré Nga’a mo to build peace also inspired CAR refugees around Garoua-Boulaï to request that the ritual be performed within their camps in order to prevent replicating the violence in CAR in their host country. Local chiefs and other leaders explain that the Soré Nga’a mo is the reason why grenades, shooting of firearms, and lance flame of rebels of the Séléka did not affect the city.

A key enabling factor for this success was the willingness of government administrative officials such as divisional officers and mayors to support the ritual. Structurally, as part of the balancing of traditional leadership and the administrative state, local chiefs need to make a formal request to administrative officials in order to allow the Oko ’o Nga’a mo to perform the ritual. In Garoua-Boulaï, the chief Yadji Mathieu claims that all requests to initiate the ritual have been approved by the divisional chief, allowing for successful peacebuilding. This is in sharp contrast to other areas of East Cameroon: in Bertoua and Mandjou, Gbaya women leaders complain that chiefs have sidelined them in peace processes, leading to rising tensions between the Gbaya (who are mostly farmers) and other peoples, such as the Fulani herders. In some cases, administrative authorities are in fact asking for the Soré Nga’a mo to be performed.

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61 Djouldé, Tribute.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Djouldé, interview with Chief Yadji and Sodea, November 02, 2018, in Garoua-Boulaï; Djouldé, interview with Mayor Yafo, November 05, 2018, in Garoua-Boulaï.
65 Ibid.
66 Djouldé, interview with Chief Yadji Mathieu, November 02, 2018, in Garoua-Boulaï.
RECOMMENDATIONS

The protracted nature of many of Africa’s violent conflicts is a strong indicator that while current approaches to peace, security, and development are still inadequate, despite making important progress. International and national-level actors interested in building peaceful and just societies should carefully take stock of what has worked, and where existing gaps need to be addressed. Based on the analysis of local African scholars, leading policymakers, and Search’s significant on-the-ground experience leading conflict transformation changes in Africa, Search and SSRC provide the following recommendations:

1. **Adopt a more comprehensive gender lens that goes beyond “women’s issues” and examines gender norms for all gender identities and how these shape violent conflict.** This must include carefully examining norms that define masculinity and how such norms may fuel or mitigate conflict. The rethinking of gender norms should be adopted at the highest levels of policy frameworks, such as through revisiting of the UN’s WPS agenda; adjusting the strategies of major international donors, peacebuilding, and the development actors, like the World Bank’s Fragility, Conflict, and Violence strategy; and strengthening national action plans and legislation to address gendered dynamics of conflict.

2. **Support national governments, regional bodies, and international agencies in designing common international standards and interorganizational coordination plans to address transnational conflict dynamics.** Whether in the field of refugees and IDP resettlement, climate change, or movements of armed actors across porous borders, shared norms, better coordination, and harmonization of approaches/actions between governments and agencies would enable them to better address conflict systems. At the same time, international partners should promote accountability for national governments and multilateral agencies when implementing and institutionalizing such frameworks domestically.

3. **Promote a cross-border approach to peacebuilding that reduces country-based silos in organizational structures and program implementation.** International donors in particular have a key role to play in providing more flexible funding and other resources to non-state groups working on preventing violence across national boundaries. Doing so will likely entail increased flexibility for project resources to be interchanged between activities happening in multiple countries, as well as more flexible project timelines to enable better responses to deeply complex transnational conflict dynamics.

4. **Prioritize engaging local actors, including actors outside of local NGOs and governments, to generate violence prevention solutions with broad community buy-in.** Even amidst the most violent contexts, local champions for peace are often working tirelessly to promote peace and tolerance within their communities, even if these champions are not formally recognized organizations or agencies. While technical assistance or funding from international and national
actors are helpful, such programs should identify and amplify locally led solutions and, as much as possible, play a supporting role to local/grassroots communities.

5. **Hold international humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding initiatives accountable to developing and implementing transition plans to increase the sustainability of positive changes.** How to sustain hard-won progress when a non-local actor exits is a question that needs to be an integral part of any project or initiative’s life cycle, including at the initial planning phase. It should also be continuously adapted to reflect contextual changes. International donors can help encourage this approach by requiring project proposals to articulate a thorough transition strategy, and by making resources available to build the capacity of local partners in areas such as multi-stakeholder engagement, policy advocacy, and fundraising.

6. **Strengthen the linkages between Africa-based scholarship and locally produced knowledge with national, regional and international policymaking and practitioner communities.** A negligible proportion of international aid for peace and security issues is devoted to research emerging from Africa: between 2010 and 2018, only 1 - 3.5 percent of OECD’s official development assistance for conflict, peace, and security were devoted to teaching institutes, research institutes, or think tanks.\(^\text{67}\) Despite often being overlooked by major international- and national-level communities of practice, a rich body of knowledge produced by African academics and researchers exists. Rigorous research designs and evidence should be the bedrock of programs and policies to support peace and security, and African scholars and researchers are well-equipped with the contextual knowledge to make significant contributions. Increased engagement can take many forms, including fellowships for scholars to spend time in a practice-based organization - or for practitioners to spend time in academia - and regular practitioner-policymaker-scholar dialogues to discuss how the latest research findings can inform peace and security initiatives.

**CONCLUSION**

As national governments, multilateral bodies, and other actors push ahead with reforms around foreign assistance, development, and peacebuilding, it is vital that they take into consideration the major gaps that this reflection paper has identified. First, the multifaceted ways that gender intersect with conflict must be better researched and must inform better policies and on-the-ground programming. Second, expanding international coordination and increasing flexibility on how resources can be used across borders are needed in order to tackle the causes and effects of violent conflict that transcend political boundaries. Last, the voices of those most affected by violence must be central to any international intervention to promote peace. To promote sustained positive changes in communities, more effort is needed to develop partnerships with these actors, especially non-traditional peacebuilding actors beyond local NGOs.

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This paper is not exhaustive, and other gaps exist. Nonetheless, the case studies which African experts have helped highlight provide cause for optimism and models of what effective peacebuilding can look like. Although the early warning/early response mechanism in Northeast Nigeria was coordinated by Search, a major international NGO, it was operationalized by local stakeholders and had broad buy-in in communities where it operated. The emphasis on creating partnerships with and among existing local institutions was a key factor in the mechanism’s success and was one of the main selling points that convinced the Adamawa State government to take over ownership and scale up the system. The Gbaya women of Cameroon and CAR demonstrate that women take on diverse roles in conflict, sometimes as the chief peacebuilders in their communities. In the absence of effective inter-governmental initiatives, such women’s groups and other non-governmental actors can play a crucial role to prevent transnational conflict dynamics from further escalating.

In many of Africa’s chronic crises, people have suffered too much and for too long. It is in the interest of both international stakeholders and the people living in chronic crises contexts to find the most efficient and effective solutions to violence that prevent future resurgence. Knowledge produced by African scholars, researchers, and experts contributes significantly to this effort and must be prioritized. We hope that this collaborative project by Search for Common Ground and the Social Science Research Council can inspire more such academic-policy exchanges in the future.
REFERENCES


