



Wilton Park



Report

Peacebuilding in Africa: Transitions, Complexities and Responses

Tuesday 18 – Thursday 20 April 2023 | WP3152

In association with:



With support from:





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**In association with the African Peacebuilding Network of the Social Science Research Council, New York and the African Leadership Centre, Nairobi
With support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York**

This conference is the culmination of the annual Wilton Park series on peacebuilding in Africa that started in 2015. It has been held in partnership with the African Peacebuilding Network of the Social Science Research Council, New York and the African Leadership Centre, Nairobi, with support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Previous events assessed the concept of next generation African peacebuilding, the changing landscape of conflict and new African thinking on peacebuilding, how to sustain civil society engagement in peacebuilding, how to build more effective interaction between African and global peacebuilding, and focused case studies exploring the dynamics of peacebuilding in specific contexts.

This sixth and final conference will take stock of evolutions in peacebuilding in Africa since the first five conferences, exploring the continuities and complex changes that have occurred. The conference will also critically examine emerging issues in the current peace and security landscape that currently shape, and will likely affect African peacebuilding in the future, and how to respond to them. The centrality of youth and the variety of ways in which youth agency is manifesting in Africa will receive particular emphasis. The meeting has the following specific objectives:

- To assess the key conclusions and outcomes from previous conferences that have relevance for peacebuilding in Africa today;
- To take stock and assess the implications of progress and changes in the field, as well as the impact of responses through the lens of strategic and authoritative voices on peacebuilding in Africa;
- To consider the implications of current and emerging developments for the future of peacebuilding in Africa and the role of youth and inter-generational engagement with peacebuilding.

Key points

- The role of youth in Africa's present and future is critical to all discussions of peace, security, and development. Youth are one of the most affected groups by insecurity and violence, and their lived experiences must inform policy and practice.

- Intergenerational dialogue and co-leadership are fundamental to the development of responsive and actionable policies at the international, multilateral, national, and community levels. Youth must be brought into decision-making spaces and must be given co-ownership over policy development and implementation.
- Youth identities are diverse and cross-cutting. Gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic background and other identities are all reflected in youth, which can compound existing issues of marginalization.
- Narratives about youth must resist classifying youth as troublemakers or delinquents. Most youth are everyday peacebuilders and engage in activities at the interpersonal level that contribute to larger systems of peacebuilding at the national and international levels. Youth that do turn to violent extremism or criminal behaviour often do so because of a wide range of factors such as unemployment and marginalisation by the state. The importance of dignity must be centred in narratives surrounding youth disenfranchisement.
- Peacebuilding in Africa is affected by several global changes and transformations, not least of which include the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, increasing US-China strategic rivalry, and the rising number of hybrid democracies.
- These developments influence and interact in complex and unpredictable ways with emerging peace and security factors and trends in Africa such as military coups, economic problems, climate change, violent extremism, and the use of mercenary forces.
- A concerning outcome of global changes and transitions is a stagnation or undermining of multilateral norms and security regimes, with a resulting lag in their application.
- Evolving global developments present both potential opportunities and inadvertent risks for African agency in global fora and the restructuring of the peace agenda in Africa.
- Promoting African ownership of its peacebuilding agenda by securing financial autonomy and engaging with African civil societies, businesses and other indigenous actors is critical to reduce the risks posed by these global transitions and complexities.
- Establishing an African-based and African-financed peacebuilding fund complemented by a peacebuilding strategy that systematically engages the private sectors would enhance African ownership of its peacebuilding agenda.
- The current peacemaking norm in Africa, where inordinate attention is given to actors with violent capacity, must be seriously questioned.
- The African Union (AU) and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) can arrest the reversal of norms related to youth engagement by socialising and embedding these norms into national laws, enhancing youth engagement in leadership, regularly monitoring and evaluating youth related engagements, and challenging sources of norm reversal.
- Knowledge production for enhancing youth engagement in peacebuilding and investment in platforms that support this knowledge production and capacity building for youth, women and other marginalised groups should be an agenda for sustained reflection.

Introduction

This ninth and final iteration of Wilton Park's Peacebuilding in Africa conference series served as a comprehensive overview of the complexities and transitions facing the field of peacebuilding in Africa. Building off the conclusions and recommendations of the previous meetings in the series, the discussions took stock of the progress and setbacks that have defined recent trends. Intersecting challenges such as the rise in the youth population, the spread of violent extremism, worsening climate change, global geopolitical instability, and other factors have necessitated unique approaches paired with actionable initiatives. This meeting, which brought together youth, policymakers, scholars, activists, and others sought to interrogate the underlying factors that shape current challenges and to conceptualise frameworks for addressing the complex dynamics at play in the realm of peacebuilding and conflict in Africa.

Youth, Protest, the State, and Peacebuilding

1. Youth form an integral, major part of the complex social fabrics of African societies, although their voices and actions are often marginalised or misrepresented. There are theoretical deficits of the nation-state in Africa, which directly affect how the state and youth interact and has led to cycles of oppression and maintenance of the domination of older elites.
2. African youth are in dialogue with the state on multiple fronts. Youth express their political identities through voting, abstaining from voting, protesting online and offline, creating social movements, registering voters, and other modes of engagement.
3. In the past, revolutions led by youth have been co-opted by urban elites, which in some countries then led to only marginal reforms. More recently, various new modes of youth participation have arisen because of social media and the ability for discourse about the state and social movements to occur more freely. Nevertheless, some repressive governments have adapted to the migration of social movements online, prompting new questions about freedom of speech in the digital age.
4. Although online spaces have created more opportunities for youth participation in the political process, there is a need to develop avenues for youth engagement with the state that can be translated into substantive policy initiatives in a way that isn't open to co-option by the state.
5. Problematic political and social shifts such as coups and xenophobic movements are often marked by resistance led by youth. Youth that do celebrate coups tend to be celebrating the fact that the status quo has, at least temporarily, changed rather than the fact that there was an undemocratic change in leadership.
6. Dialogue with the state is only a starting point. Intergenerational co-leadership, although difficult to conceptualize and implement, is the most promising path toward more inclusive societies that can effectively understand and respond to youth's challenges and aspirations.
7. The African Union's 10-Year Implementation Plan for The Continental Framework On Youth, Peace And Security (YPS) should continue to be pursued and applied strategically to each national context. Balancing generalized reporting and measurable indicators with specific national contexts presents challenges, but also opportunities for greater cross-continental mutual learning. A common agenda across the African Union, the United Nations, and national governments could help facilitate the implementation of youth-centred peacebuilding and development strategies.
8. Donors and multilateral organisations must orchestrate a paradigm shift away from a sole focus on short term activity planning for youth initiatives and instead should reorient time and resources on long term, more ambitious programming.

Youth Identities and Narratives of Youth

9. Shifting demographics are a lived reality in Africa, and the growth of the youth population should be approached analytically. Youth should be involved in decision making processes because they can provide intrinsically valuable input to the development and execution of policy, not simply because they are a growing demographic. While the statistics on the growth of the youth population are important, there is more value in acknowledging that instability and violence have disproportionately affected youth.
10. A focus on youth is also justified by the fact that they are the future leaders shaping future peace. Today's youth will be occupying national and international leadership roles in the future, and what they think and act on in the present has influence on future peace processes. Intergenerational dialogues are important for discussions of common threats and the ways in which blended knowledge and historical experience can inform collaboration and solutions.
11. Youth identities are not monolithic. Gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic background, and other identities all cut across youth identity. Certain groups, such as young women or LGBTQIA+ youth, face compounding levels of societal marginalization that adversely affect their wellbeing and thus deserve distinct attention and resources.
12. Various narratives dominate the discussion around youth. The victimization narrative threatens to disempower youth and overlooks the reality of youth agency in local, national, international, and digital spaces. Unfortunately, many young people have internalized their marginalization and perceive themselves and their peers as heroic for joining violent extremist groups.
13. Another narrative, that of youth as troublemakers, threatens to exclude youth from policymaking and peacebuilding dialogues. Rather than dismissively defining youth as troublemakers, governments and institutions should focus on understanding and ameliorating the conditions that may have induced youth to engage in criminal activities, violent conflict, or other destabilizing behaviours.
14. On the occasions when youths are invited into dialogue with power brokers and decision makers, they may not have either the capacity or formal agenda to effectively leverage the dialogues for their own benefit. Notably, youth cannot be treated as "sounding boards," wherein youth are given space to speak, but no role in follow up policy development or implementation.
15. Countervailing narratives of youth should be promoted, wherein the role of youth as assets to society and peacebuilders reshapes the approaches that communities and governments take to addressing the challenges that youth face. Integrating the desires of youth for security and dignity, oftentimes through employment, with the overall enterprise of peacebuilding is paramount to the cultivation of sustainable peace.

Ongoing Global Transformations, Normative Stagnation and Peacebuilding in Africa

16. Peacebuilding in Africa is impacted by several regional and global transformations and changes. These include the increasing strategic competition and trade wars between China and the US, trends of rising hybrid democracy in Africa and around the world, and the alarming expansion of violent extremism across Africa.

17. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated instability, as well as the Russia-Ukraine war, are other recent changes with significant ramifications for peacebuilding. The hoarding of vaccines and the retreat to narrow nationalism across the developed world, for instance, remained a source of disgruntlement of the people of Africa. In part, due to the way the West reacted to the pandemic, the much-sought for solidarity with Ukraine in the Russia-Ukraine war was not forthcoming from Africa. Moreover, the pandemic further accentuated the decline in the rule of law and democracy across Africa as several unpopular restrictions were imposed in many African states.
18. The Russia-Ukraine war had several ramifications for peacebuilding in Africa. When the war broke out, the price of imported goods, fertilizers, and fuel skyrocketed, pushing millions into poverty and food insecurity. At the same time, the conflict generated deeper collaboration between Russia and China with the potential for heralding Cold War like global division. The consequences of this realignment for Africa and what Africans can do about it is open to question.
19. In some ways, this global division might give more freedom of choice for African actors, but in others it may undermine security in Africa. Russia, as a major supplier of weapons and private security, may use this leverage regardless of its peacebuilding ramifications. Indeed, the diversity of African member states' votes at the UN on issues relating to Russia's actions in Ukraine, as well as the intensive effort to engage Africa by both the US and Russia through repeated and multiple visits are indicative of Africa's choice and agency. Africa is also demonstrating some attempts at influencing global developments by calling for equitable representation in the UN Security Council and other global fora, as well as expressing its frustration with the uneven application of the international liberal normative system.
20. The decline in international cooperation and security in the context of global transformations has rendered African ownership of its peacebuilding agenda more urgent than ever. However, there is still debate on how this goal of owning the peacebuilding agenda could be pursued and achieved, and whether this entails moving away from liberal approaches to peace or not.
21. The Western liberal model was adopted without much reflection on its relevance, and those who opposed it were often marginalised. There is an unsettling lack of trust in state institutions and the democratisation process across Africa. This is reflected in the increasing number of states that are challenged by violent extremism and some citizens' preference for authoritarianism and service delivery over democracy. Hence, new ways of forging power, institutionalising governance and state building must be pursued while resisting the tendency to consider elections as ends in themselves and seriously reflecting on what democracy means in different contexts.
22. The relevance of norms and norm-setting to the restructuring of the peace agenda and dialogue on the type of social contract citizens will have with their state must not be overlooked. However, multilateral norms might be stagnating due to regional and global changes.
23. For some, this 'normative stagnation' is simply a lag in the application of otherwise appropriate norms. From this perspective, the problem with the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and the RECs is not as much an issue of norms as it is of their application. Hence, there is no need to invent new norms distinct from liberal ones, but rather a need to work on the application of these norms. For others, the middle powers are creating new norms without calling them 'norms,' manifested for instance in the way liberal norms relate to defence and security issues. Even in Africa, the trend of peacekeeping has been strongly exhibiting ad hoc features shaped by the interests of member states and temporary 'coalitions of the willing'.

24. Africa needs to own its peacebuilding agenda, which cannot be achieved insofar as the APSA is seen by many ordinary Africans to be at the service of heads of state used to perpetuate their power. There must be serious engagement of African civil societies, businesses and other indigenous actors in the AU peace and security structures. Admittedly, these latter actors have several limitations; CSOs are often not transparent, accountable, and capable enough to engage on issues in a way that makes a difference. Additionally, a large portion of the business community is engaged in rent-seeking activities.
25. African ownership of its peacebuilding agenda will also not be possible without overcoming reliance on external funding. The AU-REC's failure to mobilise domestic resource is as much due to the lack of political will as it is to the lack of resources. Some RECs, like ECOWAS, have developed a robust resource mobilisation scheme and therefore were able to generate greater resources than others.
26. The AU/RECs have an adequate normative framework on youth participation. However, much is left to be desired in diffusing and implementing these frameworks at the national and sub-national levels and in nurturing a constituency for these norms in African civil societies, governments, business and other relevant actors. Building institutions that are inclusive and accountable through questioning the concept and reality of the social compact between African states and their people will be important to this process of embedding these frameworks.
27. The current peacemaking norm in Africa, where inordinate attention is given to actors with violent capabilities, must be seriously questioned. While this might be framed as a pragmatic search for peace, it is also undermining the quest for durable peace by incentivising actors to deploy violence in the pursuit of their political demands. In Sudan's trilateral negotiation, for instance, the main actors were the security actors while civic movements such as members of the resistance committees were not part of the negotiations.
28. The discussion of normative stagnation and African ownership of its peacebuilding agenda cannot be approached in isolation from the issues of African leadership. The AU is not providing the needed leadership and has allowed expedient approaches to peace keeping deployed outside its African Standby Force (ASF) framework.
29. The AU/RECs can undertake several measures to counter the reversal in the use and deployment of normative frameworks and instruments related to youth engagement. These could include grounding the frameworks in African values, socialising youth with these frameworks using educational institutions, embedding these frameworks into national laws including constitutions, utilizing the different leverage points of the AU/RECs, advocating youth and women's issues in different fora, enhancing youth engagement in leadership, regularly monitoring and evaluating youth related engagements, and challenging sources of norm reversal including the ideology of prosperity gospel and practices of state capture.
30. There are various avenues and platforms that are used to express African youth voices and agency. Youths are already very engaged in social protests, though this rarely translates into lasting change. The growing influence of China and other middle powers in Africa is also opening opportunity for exercising African (youth) agency. Africa, for instance, has received widespread support for a seat in the G20.

31. To increase the voices and agency of Africa in these fora, it is important to build coalitions of reform that capitalise on opportunities such as the possibility of greater mobility and availability of innovative technologies. It is also important to reflect on how Africans' capacity to hold power and influence at the global level for Africa's benefit can be enhanced, how the capacity and agility of its youth can be built, how youth could be empowered to monitor the state, and how the diaspora can be engaged. Properly empowered African youth could shift the narratives about China-Africa relations, educate the world about Africa, and engage in innovation, politics, and diplomacy.

Transitions and Complexities in African Peacebuilding

32. There are several contemporary changes and continuities in the insecurity landscape of Africa. Rising trends of coups in West Africa, inflation and growing indebtedness, increasing manifestations of climate change induced problems, the increasing visibility of the shortcomings of APSA, the decreasing rate of external investment into Africa including from China, and the increasing role of mercenaries are some of the recent developments undermining peace and security in Africa. On a positive note, Africa appears to be seeing a decrease in youth commitment to ideologically driven participation in extremist organisations, along with a rise in innovations and use of technology, levels of financial inclusion, youth participation and inclusion, and a blossoming creative economy.
33. A review of the conclusions of the past eight Wilton Park conferences highlights the role of these conferences in ideation (shaping agendas and issues through innovative ideas), translation (re-framing issues to inform policy and practice), and execution (implementation of policies).
34. Numerous recurring issues from past Wilton Park were again raised by participants. These involved issues related to the interaction between global and local actors and factors of peacebuilding, AU peace and security architectures and their relevance, the search for new paradigms of peacebuilding, the narratives and contestations on youth, peace and security, the state and durable peace in Africa, gender and peacebuilding, financing peacebuilding, and issues related to radicalism and violent extremism in Africa. While these issues are still relevant, emerging issues of climatic responses and the Russia-Ukraine war added complexity to the peacebuilding landscape.
35. In past conferences, the ideation component of the global agenda was repeatedly critiqued yet embraced in practice. At the level of regional organisations, there has not been sufficient ideation because intellectuals have not been able to challenge the practices and decision-making of these organisations. These African regional organisations appear to influence the knowledge production process in such a way that the resultant knowledge does not appear threatening to heads of state. Consequently, ideas that have little relevance for African realities dominate. One solution to this could be empowering citizens to make these organisations accountable for what they do in Africa.
36. Because of the lack of sufficient ideation, the peace conversation in Africa is dominated by the gun rather than the pen. Non-coercive powers such as positional power, expert power, and referent power are fundamental to the conversation on peace and war. The latter are often manifested in the pen, the spoken word, and the internet. Coercive power, however, has dominated because non-coercive power often fails to generate alternative ideas of peace and the state, hence the need to organise to generate knowledge. That said, the dominance of the gun may be as much due to the failure to translate knowledge into policy as it is due to the lack of quality knowledge.

Key peacebuilding Challenges and Suggested Solutions

During the two-day conference, participants identified a few core peacebuilding problems and suggested solutions for overcoming them in the next three years. These problems and their solutions are:

- A. The problem: How to encourage the private sector contributes to peacebuilding in Africa?**
- B. The Solution:** Establish a **core team** from different sections of society, that will do a stakeholder analysis and recruit various business and non-business actors who will constitute a **multi-stakeholder board**. The **multi-stakeholder board** will develop a private sector strategy for peacebuilding in Africa. The board will consult with business and non-business actors and develop a strategy and policies on how the private sector could be engaged to contribute to peacebuilding. This potentially entails adapting ongoing corporate social responsibility initiatives as well as developing new tools of engagement. The **board** will also establish and oversee the operation of the body to implement the policies as well as establish an entity that will monitor and evaluate this implementation. After tracking implementation and developing lessons learned in the implementation processes, there will be a further convening of stakeholders.
- A. The problem: How to promote investment in the establishment and growth of platforms that promote knowledge production and capacity building for youth, women, and other marginalised groups in Africa?**
- B. The Solution:** **First**, identify these platforms, which will include higher education establishments, research institutes and think tanks, grassroots organisations, government and regional organisations, civil society organisations, mainstream and new media and digital spaces, private sector actors, celebrities, and activists. **Second**, shape and influence the incentives of these actors, which would include: financial incentives, incentives of gaining recognition, possibilities for partnership, access, solidarity, and enhanced access to information. **Third**, address challenges of time, coordination, organisation, agenda-setting, and prioritisation of marginalised groups. **Fourth**, manage disincentives by identifying and dealing with spoilers, developing solidarity with different groups, building consensus and ownership, deploying intersectoral and feminist approaches and participatory modes of engagement, and offering training to develop advocacy, leadership, and negotiation skills. **Finally**, create synergy between scholars and policy makers through translating research in policy accessible language as well as using engagement platforms and other informal networks and influences.
- A. The Problem: Knowledge production on youth, peace and security issues: what kind of knowledge, how and for whom?**
- B. The Solution:** Produce knowledge in the key areas of alternative approaches and conceptualisations of youth, peace and security; conceptualising peace in Africa; and the use of technologies such as GPS to innovate for collective wellbeing. Deploy an approach to knowledge that focuses on co-creation and co-production of knowledge bringing together different stakeholders; financing the production of knowledge; and intergenerational engagement.
- A. The Problem: How to establish an African based and African sponsored peacebuilding fund?**

B. The Solution: Set up a **consortium** of CSOs, youth and women’s organisations that manage the fund. The **consortium** will have a very strong identity, well-defined guidelines and values, and will develop criteria for access to the fund. The **consortium** will identify critical people such as multinational companies and private individuals, called “impact investors,” to mobilise their resources. The **consortium** will adopt a portfolio approach targeting different interest groups. To make the fund sustainable, the consortium will demonstrate the fund’s impact for peace. While the risks of donor fatigue, changes in funder priorities, and lack of political goodwill might be encountered, the **consortium** will overcome them by diversifying funders, adopting integrated and multisector programming, demonstrating dividends, and combining peace education with livelihood intervention.

Conclusion

The Wilton Park conferences on Peacebuilding in Africa series has served as an important convening space for shaping peacebuilding ideas and agendas, bringing together diverse African voices and perspectives in a time of global transitions and complexities. This year’s conference connected these complexities and transitions with the stagnation of global and regional multilateral norms and the consequent need for African ownership of its peacebuilding agenda. Both youth and the state must play key roles in this process. Key conclusions emerging from the conference are:

- Although African youth are demonstrably exercising their voices and agencies, this has rarely led to lasting peace due to systemic barriers.
- The nature of the state is critical for translating youth agency into the pursuit of lasting peace and there consequently needs to be sustained theoretical and empirical engagement with the idea of the “state.”
- Intergenerational dialogue and co-leadership might pave the way for productive engagement between the state and youth with the aim of developing lasting peace.
- Ongoing global transformations, along with their interactions with pre-existing trends, are undermining the entrenchment of multilateral norms, peace and security.
- This erosion and stagnation of norms has necessitated African ownership of its peacebuilding agenda by securing the financial autonomy of the AU’s peace and security programmes and peacekeeping operations as well as by engaging a wide array of civil society and business actors.
- Knowledge production for enhancing youth engagement in peacebuilding and investment in platforms that enhance this knowledge production and capacity building for youth, women and other marginalised groups should constitute an agenda for sustained reflection.

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