

**VICE  
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Journalism on  
global development

PEACE NEXUS SPECIAL  
SPRING 2024



**A new  
perspective  
to  
thrive**

How humanitarian aid, peace, and  
development are now linked into a trinity



# EDITORIAL



## Colophon

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**PEACE NEXUS SPECIAL**

**SPRING 2024**

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**Why do people (men, women, and youngsters) choose radicalisation, polarisation, and violence? And why exactly do others choose differently?** These questions have become increasingly urgent when we look at what is currently happening around the world. Take the Sahel, for example—only a few decades ago, there were hopeful developments there.

However, it has now become a region of coups d'état and excessive violence against the population by Islamic terrorist groups. The prospects for the population are becoming increasingly bleak. The controversial Wagner Group is now stepping in to help restore order as governments have lost the ability to do so themselves and have severed ties with their former French coloniser.

Or take countries such as Burundi, South Sudan, Sudan, the Central African Republic, and Eastern Congo, where only a spark is needed to make the powder keg explode. And more recently, the attacks by Houthi rebels from Yemen on Western ships sailing through the Red Sea. In doing so, they hope to bring about an end to Israel's violence against the Palestinian population. Major conflicts are fuelled and provoked, and often are a result of radicalisation. In addition, democracy seems to be on the decline all over the world, with right-wing populist leaders winning one election after another.

**The broad field of international cooperation—government, civil society** organisations, and science—is also intensively involved in these developments in the world. For many years, this mainly occurred in separate worlds: short-term humanitarian aid, long-term structural development cooperation, and peace-building work.

In the meantime, it is becoming increasingly clear that tackling immense world problems in isolation is no longer feasible; instead, they must be addressed in conjunction. There's even a term for it: the Peace Nexus. A large number of interrelated factors lead to conflict and people's involvement in violence. Socio-economic factors, including poverty, lack of access to education, and also lack of opportunities, can create an environment in which extremist ideologies appear attractive.

The Dutch organisation ZOA approached *Vice Versa* to make this special edition. ZOA has given extra attention to the Peace Nexus by organising a symposium on the subject around its fiftieth anniversary. We reached out to several other organisations and knowledge institutions that are working on the subject of Peace Nexus for their expertise—and they all share their experiences in this magazine.

Interesting things are taking place, though, at the same time, there is still a long way to go. Funding for this type of work is often still very fragmented, with organisations often remaining in their comfort zone, not yet open enough to collaborate with others. We hope that this special will contribute to further decompartmentalisation.

**Marc Broere and Eunice Mwaura**  
Editors-in-chief of *Vice Versa*



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Across the globe, both in the Global South and in the North, democracy is on the back foot. This article poses the question, concerning fragile and conflict-affected states in the South: should the partners of fragile countries that veer away from democracy remain engaged—and if so, how?

Text by Bram Posthumus

Artwork by AbdulWadud Bayo

There are many reasons why countries move towards autocracy and away from democratic rule and consensus building. A major cause appears to be dissatisfaction, caused by the inability of democracy to deliver necessities like health care, education, justice, water, electricity, and inclusivity. Arguably, the most direct cause is the failure to deliver security. This makes people lose faith in the Western-style representative democracy the Global South has been asked to copy since the end of the Cold War in 1991.

Scenes of armed groups raiding villages or violence meted out by the armed forces have played out countless times in the troubled Sahel region, Eastern and Central Africa, and elsewhere. They erode trust between governments and entire populations. The autocratic regimes are very good at selling their tough take-no-prisoners approach as more effective, even when it is not. For example, the relatively easy victory of the Malian army and their Russian Wagner mercenary partners at the Tuareg rebel capital of Kidal last November. It obscures the fact that elsewhere, the war against self-styled jihadist armed groups is stalling and attacks are multiplying.

The same is happening in junta-led Burkina Faso and Niger. Meanwhile, in Myanmar, a ruthless state army backed to the hilt by Russia is on the brink of losing the entire country to a combined force of armed rebel groups. These issues raise legitimate questions.

Christian Kuitert, from the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law in The Hague, asserts: 'Was there ever democracy? Often, it resembled a façade behind which the elites played their games, which gave rise to popular discontent.' The people's biggest beef? The lack of an inclusive and democratic government, demonstrated by widespread corruption, which is often ignored by Western donors and partners.

There are many instances where promises carried by independence and democracy have not been fulfilled. David Deng is a lawyer who has helped create the South Sudan Law Society and is based in the Zimbabwean capital of Harare as a consultant. 'The idea of gaining independence was universally endorsed,' he says, 'but we had no idea what to expect when we finally did in 2011, in South Sudan.' Unfortunately, the country's first decade as an independent state has been marked by disappointment and a terrible civil war.

# The way of the autocrats



The complaint from Mali's vast northern region is that it had missed out on development opportunities between 1991 and 2020, the supposed era of democratic rule. In reality, this was pretty much the case in all of Mali. A village half an hour's drive from the capital, Bamako, still has no water, electricity, a less-than-basic health clinic, a barely functioning school, no job opportunities, and corrupt government officials.

**While the new military rulers gave insecurity** as the main reason for their coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the actual reasons were anxieties about their job security. So, the best way to safeguard that is... taking your boss's job. Their coups required propaganda, which was easily accessible: portraying the supposedly democratic governments as failures, unable to deliver on their promises, while promising that the new rulers would take a more severe approach that would succeed in restoring security.

It was an excellent spin, which also fed off underlying dissatisfaction with exclusion, marginalisation, lack of basic services, and poverty in a state that is often regarded as predatory. What happens when democracy disappears in this fashion? The usual reaction of development partners is normally predictable: disengagement, leaving civil society working to sustain the power of the people under-resourced and without political support. David Deng has seen it happen in response to the slide that South Sudan made into civil war and autocratic leadership.

'Washington (arguably their most prominent backer) is now very negative in general—you sense that when you talk to staffers in policy making,' he says. 'We are all disappointed at how things have developed. However, more sustained international engagement would have been good.' Whether the international community can effect change in societies that take turns for the worse is debat-

able, but Deng's example illustrates that turning away completely guarantees a negative outcome. This applies to all major donors, including, of course, the European Union, the subject of other articles in this issue. So, leaving is not the way to go. Christian Kuitert explains some of the thinking behind this position.

'As a partner, you have made investments. You have built relationships not only with civil society, but also with state and government representatives. You have helped create programmes. Then something happens in the capital city, usually a coup. In response, you say: "Humanitarian assistance only." It is an easy sell, though not the right one.' If you wish to remain engaged as a partner, provided your former partner turned authoritarian still wants to talk to you, how do you operate? More specifically, how do you avoid the main pitfall of lending legitimacy to an unconstitutional regime?

Kuitert argues that this is not a legitimate dilemma. 'First, you cannot just leave everyone to their own devices. The Netherlands, for good reasons, has committed to many international treaties not to do so.' One only has to recall the scenes from Afghanistan after the second Taliban takeover. The consequences of the betrayal by Western donors, armies, agencies, and NGOs were severe—it caused personal trauma and a feeling of intense betrayal for those who had worked with them. It also led to the collapse of an entire nation, which was a painful experience for its people.

**Kuitert and many from the field believe that** in most circumstances, it remains possible to work with local structures that do not align with the regime in power. Those structures may very well consist of civil society organisations even if the space where they can exist is reduced. In other words, there are ways of staying engaged without legitimising new and often unconstitutional regimes.

**Since the Netherlands** Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) started work in Mali in the early years of this century, there have been four presidential elections, three coups, two transitional governments, the last of which is still in power today, a Tuareg rebellion, several Islamist extremist insurgencies, two foreign interventions, and a brusquely ended United Nations stabilisation mission—and that is just scratching the surface.

In that turbulent environment, attempts have been made to prepare Mali for a post-turbulence era, whenever that may come. The NIMD is an obvious participant in this.

Country director Célia D'Almeida recounts some of the activities: 'We have a programme funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, called *Power of Dialogue*. We involve women and youth, strengthening their capabilities to contribute to more inclusive governance. We also run Democracy Schools, funded by the European Union, where we will train almost 870 young Malians to become effective lead-

ers in political parties or civil society.'

The NIMD has helped create a committee that has been lobbying on constitutional and electoral reform issues since 2019, well before the two latest coups of 2020 and 2021. 'In this committee, we have representatives of political parties, civil society, academics, bloggers, and even influencers.'

What's more, there have been results. In 2022, the complex election management architecture, in which a plethora of institutions participated, was replaced with a single election management body, the *Autorité indépendante de gestion des élections* (AIGE). Officially, elections are slated for 2024.

All of this is against a backdrop of military rule, but there is no question of giving up. NIMD Mali is in direct contact with members of the interim parliament, known as the *Conseil National de la Transition* (CNT).

'Even though we cannot organise elaborate political dialogues with the interim parliament, we do work on specific actions with individual members,' says D'Almeida of the relationship

between her organisation and the CNT. 'Moreover, we give input to the transition process through a special committee, together with other international NGOs.'

One of the issues successfully discussed with CNT members was the electoral reform just mentioned. The message Célia D'Almeida wants to spread goes beyond the current situation.

'This is about showing our youth that there are people who believe in them and their capacities, who want to invest in their future and develop their capacities to contribute towards creating a better political environment and a more open and inclusive governance.'

'We listen to the people, compile their views on matters including security, and bring those—formally or confidentially—to the attention of the authorities and international organisations.'

'In that sense, I believe the NIMD is an example of good collaboration with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs—they listen to us—and a particularly important presence in the current situation.'

## More specifically, how do you avoid the main pitfall of lending legitimacy to an unconstitutional regime?

The Nigerian human rights and anti-corruption activist Bou-bacar Iliassou experienced such a drastic change. He saw a flawed democracy, one that jailed him and his colleagues repeatedly for perceived slights that were legitimate criticisms, replaced with military rule and even less available space. But, as Iliassou points out in another article in this issue, a crisis resulting from democracy giving way to military rule or some other form of autocracy should be seen as an opportunity to create a better democracy.

This is just one of the answers to why such engagement should be maintained. Christian Kuitert summarises some of the arguments. 'You must continue to protect people increasingly at risk in the new situation. You cannot abandon them, and yes, that is a values-based argument. It is also important to remain engaged because demographically and economically, the Global South—and Africa in particular—are the future. It is unwise to take such a radical step as leaving.' This list may make it easier to sell the argument to those in donor countries (politicians and taxpayers alike) who recognise the price of everything and the value of very little.

Further, continues Kuitert, authoritarian rule jeopardises security. It poses a threat to surrounding regions and the world at large, Europe included. This is the thinking underpinning the Dutch government's contributions to security, stability, and rule of law. The problem with this, as the IOB report *Inconvenient Realities* (August 2023) highlights, is that policies are often driven by the preoccupations of policymakers rather than the people most affected. Migration and terrorism are two such issues.

Based on his own experience, David Deng has this to say: 'South Sudanese live in a highly centralised system, with the most affected and neglected people at the end of that line. That model should be flipped on its head.' He argues that this problem of a formal and top-down approach is reflected and reinforced by the policies of donors and partners. 'We need to shift power downwards—priorities should be set locally, because building local agency is money well spent.' Patrick Bwire, in the case study we highlight briefly, has the same point of view.

**Crucial in this respect is knowledge of what donors and partners** tend to call 'informal networks'—but what we call 'informal' is more often than not precisely the authority and influence structures people recognise and trust. Deng sees something similar in the analysis of how power works in his country. 'After independence, we inherited the structures of the government from Khartoum, the Sudanese capital. What the international interventions in South Sudan did not take into account was the existence of shadowy patronage systems around violent men.'

It's not just the two visible men, president Salva Kiir and vice president Riek Machar, who took the country back to war, Deng stresses. 'This ever-shifting landscape of manipulations by politi-



cal factions and actors pervades everything, down to the household level.' It includes money flows and acts of violence—sometimes covered by calls for peace, in which even women participate. On the other side of this spectrum is the inspiring story of how knowledge of culture and language can be employed to end destructive practices like cattle raiding, as was done in Uganda.

Patrick Bwire, who told that story to *Vice Versa*, has a point to address: 'Policy making is always top to bottom. The real experience does not meet decision-making levels. We have to advocate for this because we must be at that decision-making table. We need the bottom-up approach in decision-making processes, from design to implementation to monitoring.' Talk about flipping the model on its head... but this will take a lot of unlearning old ways and learning new ones.

Let us be very honest. Generally speaking, donor governments and international NGOs often lack the ability to incorporate new and innovative approaches that leverage the complementary capacities of all actors, including local communities.

They rarely understand these non-formal, inexplicable and unpredictable structures and practices as Deng and Bwire outline, yet they exist everywhere. Focusing on these aspects is likely to contribute to the creation of new and long-lasting democracies. It can also increase trust in more inclusive and accountable systems of governance, and make them more resilient so that slipping back into authoritarianism becomes a thing of the past.



# Mapping the Terrain

## of Fundamentalism and Extremism

Text by Ayaan Abukar

Images by Leonard Fäustle

Rik Peels and his team have taken a unique approach to exploring fundamentalism and extremism. They are delving into the complex interplay between extremists and society, tracing the historical roots and examining ethical considerations. The team values inclusivity and is committed to gaining a detailed understanding of extremism, moving beyond simplistic views and towards a richer comprehension of this complex phenomenon.



In a large room overlooking the tramway, with trees bearing the last autumn leaves, Rik Peels welcomes us to the second floor of the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. Muted afternoon light seeps through the large windows, illuminating the office and casting its glow on the stacks of books under the window as well as on the massive bookcase containing hundreds of works. Two distinctive antique oak chairs under the window, amid modern furniture, attract attention—they are heirlooms, owned by the university, Peels says.

The coat of arms of Heemstede is engraved on both chairs, but their grandeur's history is unknown to him. He pushes the stacks of books aside on the round table and rearranges the chairs to make space. We are here for an in-depth interview. His research group, Extreme Beliefs—The Epistemology and Ethics of Fundamentalism, investigates the latter, extremism, fanaticism, terrorism, and conspiracy thinking. His colleagues, Naomi Kloosterboer and Nora Kindermann, join him via an online link.

There has been a global rise and resurgence of fundamentalist movements for years. Though the images of 9/11 and various terrorist attacks in Europe are still etched in our collective memory, we are now seeing a growth in extremist groups in Europe and North America. Extremism is also on the rise in the Netherlands. There is likely to be a significantly large group of Dutch-speaking followers of right-wing terrorist ideology and the growth of anti-government extremist groups—according to a recent report by the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security (NCTV).

These are people who, from a fundamental distrust, target the government and other institutions. This group emerged as a radical undercurrent of Covid measures protest and is increasingly focusing on other issues, such as the nitrogen issue and the revolting farmers. Some of them, according to NCTV, believe in conspiracy theories. Under Peel's leadership, the Extreme Beliefs research group is developing a normative-theoretical framework that will provide a deeper understanding of the drivers of fundamentalist behaviour and beliefs.

The research project is an interdisciplinary effort that involves the faculties of religion and theology as well as humanities. It involves scholars from various disciplines, including philosophers, theologians, religious scientists, historians, economists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and social scientists.

The social debate about the emergence and influence of these groups is becoming more frequent. Peels and his colleagues delve into the philosophical and theological studies of numerous extreme beliefs. What began as a philosophical exploration of fundamentalism has expanded into the realm of extremism, terrorism, and fanaticism.

Peels, a professor at the Vrije Universiteit, underscores the need for a broader view of radicalisation. 'The debate,' he says, 'has for too long been dominated by social psychology and hard empirical sciences. The aim is to unite these discussions and uncover the fundamental philosophical questions, thereby consolidating existing debates.' He is convinced that it is not enough to explain radicalised people purely based on psychopathology—he stresses that understanding them goes beyond a strictly psychopathological explanation.

'It is a philosophical challenge; it confronts us with questions about normal, healthy, rational people who hold extreme beliefs. We look at these phenomena through a philosophical lens.' Again, it's not that philosophers have never thought about this, he adds. Hannah Arendt is a well-known example, who reflected on genocide and totalitarianism in her work.

Though the images of 9/11 and various terrorist attacks in Europe are still etched in our collective memory, we are now seeing a growth in extremist groups in Europe and North America

Peels strongly emphasises the multifaceted nature of extremism and terrorism, which can cut across the entire political spectrum. His thesis is that extremism—like terrorism—can manifest itself in various political movements. This may range from Christian fundamentalism to Salafist jihadism, to the far right—both religious and secular. Thus, Extreme Beliefs examines a wide range of views to gain a deep understanding of the various manifestations of extremism.

Kindermann complements this by pointing out the diversity in its definitions by referring to the philosopher Quassim Cassam. In his recent book, *Extremism*, he distinguishes three different types: ideological, methodological, and psychological extremism. This highlights the different ways the term is used and how it can be applied to identify extremists. He analyses various concepts related to extremism, including ideology, violence, radicalisation, grievances, counter-narratives, fanaticism, radicalism, and fundamentalism.

In recent years, anti-institutional extremism has been increasingly mentioned, especially in connection with events such as the lockdowns and the rise of large groups of angry citizens. We also see that some of these groups are becoming radicalised. How do researchers view this development? 'Expressing dissatisfaction does not immediately make someone an extremist,' Peels replies.

According to Kloosterboer, it may be related to conspiracy thinking: both processes received an enormous boost during the Covid-19 crisis and by people who turned to it then. It becomes worrisome, however, when that discontent translates into actions aimed at undermining democracy. 'We want to take fundamentalists and extremists seriously,' Peels says, 'and understand their perspectives.' It is generally difficult for researchers to engage with terrorists, which is due to the nature of the research. One does not know in advance who will become one.

The investigation almost always takes place after the fact, making it difficult to collect enough data. 'There are also ethical limits to this type of research: you have to think about the boundaries. How far can you go in taking extremists seriously? Doesn't that generate empathy or even sympathy? Isn't that giving extremism a platform it doesn't deserve? They then plug the findings into the debate. That's why new researchers conduct empirical or other research, ranging from interviews with ex-ISIS fighters in the Middle East to field research in Mumbai and conspiracy theory studies.'



A phenomenon like fundamentalism is often associated with violence in public discourse and perhaps in our everyday discourse, says Kindermann: 'Many of the groups called fundamentalist have historically not been violent at all.' According to her, it is often assumed that fundamentalism leads to violence, or that fundamentalism is inherently militant.

She explains that the original historical fundamentalism was a fairly conservative Protestant group in the U.S. in the early twentieth century. Its behaviour did not align with the notion of conservatism, which typically entails the preservation of tradition or something of value.

Rather, it developed its theology in response to what was a modernist theology, which tried to deal with progressive developments. They found this trend dangerous and resisted it. Thus the term was born, through a theological struggle—that, due to circumstances, became particularly aggressive, but never violent. It consisted of a passionate discussion of their ideas.

As part of the struggle, the modernists labelled the fundamentalists' way as regressive and militant. In the second half of the twentieth century, Islamic fundamentalism emerged, and with it the link between militants, fundamentalists, and violence became strong.

This perspective leads us to the series of violent terrorist attacks that we have seen in recent years. So, how do Peels and his colleagues explain the emergence of fundamentalist or terrorist groups that use violence? Or, rather, what are the circumstances that lead groups to turn to violence? Peels argues that we need to look at three levels for the various factors that lead to extremism and radicalisation that can affect groups, individuals and institutions.

At the macro level—the society—ranges from a democratic rule of law to the lawlessness of a crisis zone. We can think of global issues, such as the phenomenon of a failed state, where a government is unable to ensure the safety of its citizens. In addition, issues such as famine, civil war, and climate change come into play. The latter is considered a threat multiplier because of the frequent problems it

brings, such as food shortages and migration.

At the meso level—the middle level—we observe the environment where a person lives, particularly in terms of their religious or political affiliation, the social circle they belong to, and the presence of minority groups within society. This level often showcases the dynamics of identity formation and polarisation between different groups. The concept of perceived injustice, where groups believe they have been wronged, emerges here.

This is often rooted in historical contexts, such as a colonial past. The micro level involves individuals or small groups, such as the Hofstad Group. Here, psychopathology may play a role. However, a plea is made to also take seriously the perspective of the extremist fundamentalist. This includes understanding narratives, stories, and experiences that lead to radicalisation.

Nevertheless, Kloosterboer, Kindermann, and Peels emphasise that macro and meso factors cannot explain everything. Some people share similar circumstances at the meso level but do not turn to violence. The problem of radicalisation seems complex and multifaceted, with agreement on injustice. Nonetheless, only some radicalise and an even smaller proportion turns to violent acts.

'There is recognition that a comprehensive explanation may not exist,' Kloosterboer says, 'but understanding and gaining insight into the factors that contribute to radicalisation is crucial.' The impact of terrorism is immense and affects large segments of society—that attacks do not occur in a vacuum is scientifically interesting, but the question of understanding extremism may not be easily comprehensible to the general public. How important is this?

'The question of whether we can understand extremism leads to a philosophical discussion of the distinction between explaining and understanding,' Peels says. 'Understanding does not necessarily imply being able to fully adopt another person's perspective, especially if we have not experienced what they have gone through. Rather, it's about recognising patterns, and sometimes it requires a degree of empathy.'



Naomi Kloosterboer

The problem of radicalisation seems complex and multifaceted, with agreement on injustice

**Clyde Missier**, an external PhD candidate from Extreme Beliefs, has conducted empirical research on the influence of right-wing rhetoric and religious fundamentalism on social media. His study focuses on young adults (18-25) from religious minority groups residing in Amsterdam and Mumbai, where social media plays a pervasive role in their lives.

His focus is on analysing the impact of right-wing rhetoric and religious fundamentalism on young adults' perceptions of the world. This research goes deeper than the surface of digital media, where Missier thoroughly explores what young people are looking for beyond pure entertainment.

A crucial aspect of the research focuses on determining whether social media use has a significant impact on these young people's world perception. He explains: 'I am investigating whether young people who are

exposed to religious scriptures such as the *Bible*, the *Gita*, or the *Quran* from a young age are changing their perception of the world through the use of social media.'

He seeks to discover whether online influencers are more influential than traditional religious writings, to identify trends and understand the role of social media in radicalisation. For example, the controversial influencer Andrew Tate came up during field research in India.

During his search for answers, Missier interviewed several young people from diverse backgrounds. He emphasises that fanatical religiosity is not always accompanied by negative connotations: 'Social media influences young people in different ways. My job is to understand the nuances and identify trends without pigeonholing people.' According to him, a person can be cognitively radicalised without

resorting to violence or illegal acts.

'You can also be cognitively radicalised and otherwise function just fine,' he adds. The difference between cognitively nonviolent fundamentalism and other forms of radicalisation lies not only in worldview, but also in behaviour. 'You can determine it by certain attitudes a person has toward the other. Can you respect the other person or not? It's about how you interact with others in a pluralistic society,' he says.

He also explores whether early exposure to different religious sources and dialogues, such as encounter education in schools, can play a preventive role against radicalisation. He stresses the importance of interaction and understanding in a pluralistic society: 'Understanding these influences is essential for constructive dialogue in a world full of propaganda and fake news.'

Kindermann stresses the importance of listening to the narratives of those who commit violence. She points to the work of professor Beatrice de Graaf, who has interviewed convicted terrorists and observed patterns in their stories.

De Graaf cites the importance of understanding the sense of injustice that leads to a personal mission to address that injustice, often linked to jihadist narratives that offer actionable perspectives for redemption.

Peels notes that only a small minority of the literature on radicalisation includes interviews with actual perpetrators. He argues for an increase in this type of primary data to gain a broader understanding, especially as new forms and blends of extremism emerge. The limitations of such interviews are also discussed, including ethical obstacles, the fact that terrorists can blow themselves up, and methodological concerns about the reliability of the story obtained.

According to Naomi Kloosterboer, thorough understanding is necessary to avoid misinterpretations. She points to previous misinterpretations of terrorism as completely irrational, when there are always reasons and a worldview behind it. Religion is also mentioned, with the idea that it is necessary to talk to people about what religion means to them before concluding its role.

'Over the past three years we have been researching different aspects of extremism,' she says. 'An important focus was on approaching fundamentalism dialogically, no longer seeing it as an irrational movement, but rather as a group with different perspectives on modernity. Critically considering our understanding of modernity was an integral part of the approach.' An interesting comparison was drawn between fundamentalists and conspiracy thinkers.


Peels emphasises that while there may be an overlap, it is incorrect to consider all conspiracy thinkers as fundamentalists. He points to research focused on conspiracy thinking and collecting empirical data to gain a deeper understanding. A central question in this is about the definition of conspiracy thinking and whether the concept of 'founded mistrust' might be a more specific and useful term.

**The debate over conspiracy thinking is complicated.** Some generalise and consider all conspiracy theories to be evil and unfounded, while others advocate a more nuanced approach. Kloosterboer notes that the dominant position seems to be to judge each conspiracy theory individually. In society, the problem of conspiracy thinking revolves around the fact that people are sucked into a worldview in which they distrust science, government, and mainstream sources of information.

They seem to distrust anything where processes are built in to ensure quality and reliability. She points to the worrying trend that people are less concerned about whether there are such processes embedded in alternative sources of information. The crucial question, she says, is whether there are mechanisms in place to hold up reliability and quality in the information people consume.

She emphasises that the problem lies not so much in asking critical questions, but in the fact that some people do not question whether similar processes of quality assurance have been applied to information presented in conspiracy theories. The contemporary complexity of extremism requires an innovative and holistic approach. We cannot separate the history of fundamentalism and its various concepts from current developments and its relationship to





## In society, the problem of conspiracy thinking revolves around the fact that people are sucked into a worldview in which they distrust science, government, and mainstream sources of information

the social debate on extremism. Kindermann therefore stresses the importance of understanding the concepts and history of terrorism, extremism, and fundamentalism: 'Those concepts have a long history in public political discourse and influence how research is framed.' There is a danger, she says, in the stereotypes that are unconsciously included in research, which can lead to distorted interpretations of the results.

Another crucial aspect that emerges in her research is the concept of polarisation. Kloosterboer sees this not as an isolated problem, but as a sign of a deeper issue, namely: not listening to people and feeling unfairly treated. She calls for a deeper analysis of the root causes of polarisation and stresses that reducing it is not enough; we must also understand why it occurs.

She adds an ethical perspective to the concept of extremism. She emphasises that it is not only about gaining knowledge, but also about acting ethically. It is important to stand up against injustice, but also to treat others as human beings, engage in conversation and understand the values and needs of others.

Peels brings up concrete examples, such as the use of the term 'wappie' during the Covid crisis and labelling terrorists as 'human animals.' He points out the dangers of such language and how it can justify behaviour. From this follows the importance of careful use of language in social debate and policy.

**Peels's fundamental insight is that our understanding of extremism needs to shift from a binary 'us vs them' mentality to a more nuanced understanding of how extremist and non-extremist groups interact with each other in society. In other words, these groups are not isolated from each other, but rather, they shape and influence each other. He argues for an understanding that sees the extremists and society as dynamically linked.**

'That observation underscores the need to look not only at extremism as an external phenomenon, but also at the interaction between society and the extremists. The results of three years of research highlight the complexity of extremism, the influence of language and stereotypes in studies, the deeper understanding of polarisation, the ethical dimension of research and the need to view extremism as a dynamic process.'

Do we see similar trends in development within fundamentalism and extremism worldwide? 'The rise of fundamentalist groups is a global phenomenon with similar patterns,' says Peels, 'especially in the area of populism. While the phenomenon seems to be out of control in the United States, we are also noticing an increase in diverse groups in the Netherlands.'

It is important to keep a close eye on particular trends in different countries, as there are emerging forms that are often called 'salad bar extremism' or 'collections.' These new forms combine elements from various extremist ideologies, making analysis more difficult and complex, Peels says. One notable development is the combination of right-wing extremism and elements of Salafist jihadism or radical Islam. This mixing of different ideologies makes analysing extremism less straightforward and requires more complex approaches.

An important aspect is the rise of populist leaders who do not conform to democratic norms and condone violence. The phenomenon is not limited to the United States, but also extends to countries such as Brazil. This suggests that populism is often accompanied by conspiracy theories and autocratic tendencies.

Social media plays a crucial role in reinforcing these trends, with algorithms often leading to the spread of extremist ideas. The impact of social media on conspiracy theories and extremism is new and creates dynamics that did not exist before.

Finally, Kloosterboer emphasises the importance of interdisciplinarity: 'This is essential for a deeper understanding of these complex social phenomena.' Kindermann adds that researchers must involve not only different scientific disciplines, but also diverse backgrounds, such as cultural, religious, and gender diversity. The realisation that research on extremism is often concentrated on the Global North emphasises the need for more inclusive perspectives.

To complement interdisciplinarity, Peels noddingly adds that it is a practical necessity to bring diverse people on board, with different fields, methods and backgrounds. However, practice is recalcitrant: 'It is a time-intensive process to develop real understanding. The project runs until the end of 2024, but it will take a few more years until all the results are published.'

**In a study that challenges** traditional assumptions about extremism, Scott Gustafson, a PhD candidate with the Extreme Beliefs programme, explores the unexpected paths taken by former ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra members.

His work, blending Christian mission efforts with de-radicalisation, peels back the layers on how some former extremists not only dropped their radical views but also converted to Christianity.

His work focuses on de-radicalisation and religious conversion from Islam to Christianity in the Levant region, with a focus on the intersection of Christian mission work and de-radicalisation. His years of experience in the Middle East and built networks were crucial elements in working on this research.

It took place in the Middle East, primarily in the Levant region, with some emphasis on Syria. His background in Middle East studies and extensive experience in Jordan facilitated his exploration of this complex topic.

He conducted interviews with a diverse group, including former ISIS fighters, Jabhat al-Nusra members, and religious workers involved in relief programmes. The surprising revelation from the interviews was that a significant number of former extremists not only de-radicalised, but also converted to Christianity.

Several key themes emerged. One notable factor was the experi-

ence of precarity, reflecting the chaos in the lives of these individuals.

They faced death, hostility, violence, displacement, and a decline in social status. Another significant aspect was the prevalence of supernatural experiences, with eighty-three percent reporting dreams or visions of someone they identified as Jesus. These encounters played a crucial role in their departure from radicalism and conversion to Christianity.

The cultural and religious context of these experiences plays an important role, according to Gustafson. In Islam, dreams and visions are esteemed, and the research found a surprising frequency of such experiences among former extremists. The involvement of clergy and religious workers in relief programmes contributed to what Gustafson termed 'mutual transformation,' challenging the concept of mutual radicalisation.

The research challenges the traditional dichotomy between hard, militaristic responses and softer approaches in counterterrorism. Contrary to the instinctive governmental reflex of punitive measures, Gustafson's study, rooted in the narratives of former extremists, unveils a surprising truth—that harsh retaliation rarely plays a significant role in reducing extremism or terrorism.

The crux of Gustafson's findings centres on describing the exit pathways from extremism. It emphasises the potency of what he terms 'soft methods': like surprising kindness,

family, belonging, relationships, and social circles.

The testimonies of these former extremists highlight that their departure from extremist environments was not triggered by fear of punishment but by the allure of belonging to a new community.

The research presents a paradigm shift in counterterrorism strategy, advocating for investments in social institutions, humanitarian aid, and relief efforts. While acknowledging the genuine security concerns that persist, he posits that a departure from a solely punitive stance could lead to a more effective counterterrorism approach.

By acknowledging the validity of the extremists' testimonies, Gustafson suggests that fostering a sense of belonging and surprising kindness may be more impactful in deterring radicalisation than conventional punitive measures.

In essence, the main finding challenges the prevailing notion of treating extremist terrorists merely as enemy combatants. Instead, he advocates for a more nuanced and compassionate approach, urging policymakers to consider methods that address the holistic needs of individuals, creating a sense of belonging for the whole person.

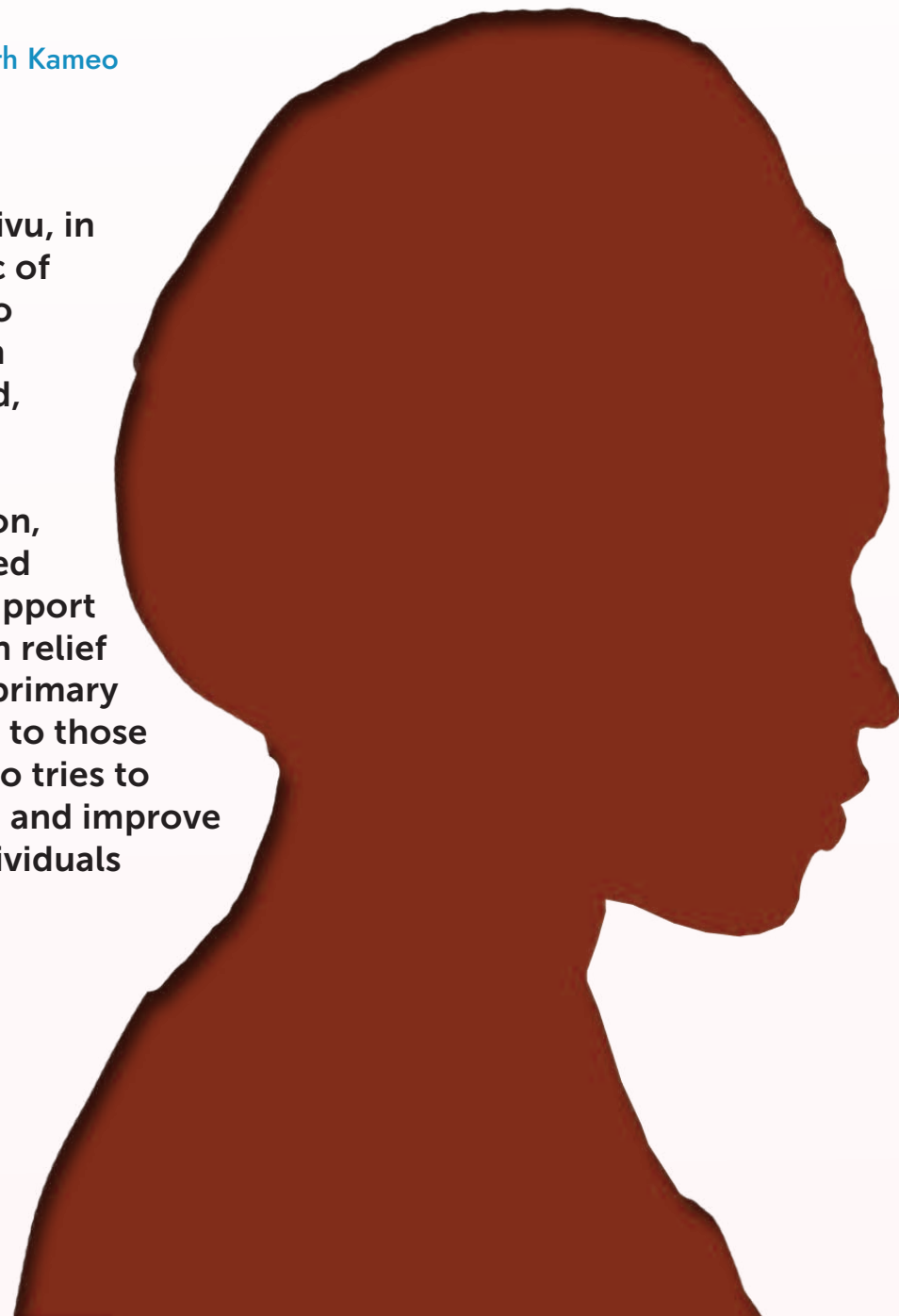
The study prompts a reevaluation of counterterrorism strategies, steering toward a more empathetic understanding of the factors driving extremism and terrorism.



# BUILDING PEACE THROUGH HEALING

by Nicera Wanjiru and Elizabeth Kameo

Communities in South Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, are committed to achieving peace through inner healing. To this end, Paix et Développement Durable, a community development organisation, is using community-based sociotherapy with the support of an international NGO in relief and recovery—ZOA. The primary aim is to provide healing to those who are distressed. It also tries to enhance social cohesion and improve relationships among individuals in (post-)conflict areas.



After more than two decades of civil war in Eastern Congo, communities have been destroyed, and the social fabric has broken down, creating mistrust among ethnic groups. To change the narrative, Paix et Développement Durable (PDD) uses the community-based sociotherapy (CBS) approach to engage communities and help individuals heal, regain confidence and trust, build dialogues, and ensure gender inclusion.

‘Today, people express themselves freely on different subjects,’ says Jonathan Hakuzwimana Kanani, from Nyabibwe village—he is a CBS facilitator with PDD in the Kalehe territory of South Kivu. ‘Women have a say about their rights and occupy positions of power, which was not the case before. Communities have found a system of resilience and collaboration.’ PDD is a non-denominational, non-political and non-profit organisation that fights for the restoration of human dignity and the trust and confidence of people in post-conflict areas. Since 2014, it has been using CBS to change the narrative.

‘CBS has not only led to the strengthening of social cohesion in the communities that have been affected by conflict, it has also led to a reduction in ethnic-fuelled conflicts and the development of a culture of dialogue,’ he says. The approach is being implemented in the Kalehe, Idjwi, and Walungu territories with support from partners, including the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. PDD facilitates community mobilisation and civic participation. It promotes horizontal democracy whereby members can raise their voices and advocate for changes in their community.

Jina Bachunguye, the PDD coordinator, states: ‘It all began with training facilitators from eleven villages in three districts between 2007 and 2011. Those trained went on to support CBS groups. At the time, we were only present in the territories of the Walungu province of South Kivu. In 2017, we expanded to Kalehe—and from three districts, we went to four. Today, we have expanded further and also support CBS groups within other projects.’

The country underwent a civil war from 1997 to 2003, and conflicts persist today. Communities are now rebuilding trust and livelihoods among different ethnic groups. Corita Corbijn, ZOA’s sector specialist in peacebuilding, elaborates that the CBS approach emphasises the component of working in groups. ‘It comes from the word itself, socio-therapy, where “socio” means group and “therapy” means healing. It refers to an individual’s healing through group interaction,’ she says.



Jonathan Hakuzwimana Kanani

‘This approach aims to strengthen people’s resilience by emphasising the role of the community. The strategy leverages the power of group sharing to build upon individuals.’ With the approach, twelve to fifteen participants come together to learn from each other, share, and reflect on their behaviours and attitudes. PDD implements this method with support from the international relief and recovery organisation ZOA.

‘We often heard individuals say: “I used to think I was the only one with such experiences. I was afraid to reach out to my neighbours, but now I feel connected. I visit my neighbours and feel like a part of the community.”’

According to Timothée Rukundo, ZOA’s DRC country director, by partnering with PDD, they were able to use the technical expertise of the facilitators in the CBS approach. ‘We work with PDD because they know how to implement it. Initially, we helped them develop institutional capacity to function as an institution rather than a group of experts without an organisation,’ he explains.

Today, he says it has borne fruit. ‘What we have seen as a result of CBS is people forgiving each other, engaging in different development activities at the community level, and gaining trust in the local leadership.’ He adds that from this forgiveness and trust, visions are shaped by participants, not only for their families but also for the communities.

‘It takes time for an impact to be sustainable. What we are witnessing now is a sustainable change with a focus on forgiveness. People are now more engaged, and they have come to appreciate that CBS is about them, their families, and communities. It is about healing and stability in their minds and hearts.’

‘Since we started implementing community-based sociotherapy, we have seen results. CBS has contributed to the social cohesion of different ethnic groups and the mental well-being of traumatised people,’ affirms Bachunguye. This, he says, was the main reason CBS was extended into other territories. The second and third reasons were the demand from the participants and the local leaders. ‘There were individuals who had been destabilised, traumatised, and had



lost confidence. The first experience showed us that CBS renewed and reconnected individuals, even those still in conflict. So, the idea to experiment in areas where inter-ethnic conflicts dragged on was borne.'

Corbijn concurs with this. 'To work on peace, we must first address root causes such as land issues or governance. You also need to consider the mental well-being of people, and you must work from the bottom going up. Start at the individual, family, and community level, and help people deal with the past—if they have not dealt with the past violence, they will not be ready for a peaceful future.'

Bachunguye explains that the CBS approach is based on six phases: safety, trust, care, respect, new orientation of life, and the handling of emotions. 'This is a healing process: when a member takes part in the programme, regardless of the stage in their life they are at, they are taken through all the different phases. This allows them to get to that desired orientation and the next step and have a different perception of their lives.'

**To build on the six phases, the approach further** draws on seven principles which when applied by the participants, boost the success and the outcome. 'Significantly, participants in the programme respect both its phases and principles,' says Bachunguye.

'There is the principle of interest, equality, democracy, participation, learning by doing, responsibility, and here and now. Discussion by participants and facilitators of these principles in their groups helps them realise the importance of applying them in their families and communities.'

'The more the participants apply these principles, the better they evolve. We do not simply tell them to have confidence and accept it to come to pass. Through CBS, participants learn by doing, which has brought about enormous change at both individual and community levels.' Bachunguye says today, they see improvements in the mental, social, and economic well-being of the people. He further adds that women today report a reduction in gender-based violence (GBV).

'Husbands who have participated in the CBS programme now have respect within their families. The mental well-being of individuals who suffered from mental turmoil before has improved. They realise they can still contribute to the development of their families and their communities.'

'They are hopeful and feel useful. Before CBS, there was mistrust amongst individuals, but sociotherapy has helped bring back confidence. People have started working together, relations between different ethnic groups have improved. They are working together towards economic development and peacebuilding.'

**Zawadi Furaha Nteranyi, who participated** in the programme, swears by its success in her community. The fifty-year-old widow and mother of eight affirms that CBS has enabled individuals and communities to find peaceful solutions to conflicts and have better livelihoods.

'Through CBS,' she says, 'our communities now resolve conflicts peacefully. There is more respect for women and girls, and girls and boys are treated equally. Also, local authorities are involving women in local governance and husbands share decision-making in the homes with their wives, which was not allowed by our culture before.'

Nteranyi, a resident of Nyabibwe village in South Kivu, participated in the programme after hearing Kanani talk about it. 'I was walking when I came across him, sensitising people about CBS. When I heard him talking about the benefits, I decided to take part.'

Thanks to the group's knowledge and advice, she was able to divide her husband's inheritance equally among her children. 'I lost him during the war, and since then, I had inheritance-related problems. Through CBS, I learned how to manage my inheritance. As a result, there are no more conflicts in my family.'

She also joined a community savings group, which has enabled her to gain access to credit to set up a business and gain economic independence. 'Today, I am a *cheftaine d'avenue*, a local neighbourhood leader in my community because I participate in the CBS groups. I raise awareness among people in my community on hygiene and sanitation issues, the dangers of malnutrition, children's vaccination, and women's and girls' reproductive health rights.'

Zawadi Furaha Nteranyi



**'If they have not dealt with the past violence, they will not be ready for a peaceful future'**

# VICE VERSA GLOBAL

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Different stakeholders and government agencies walk around Moyale town during the International Day of Peace, 2023

**In 2016, the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) or Triple Nexus concept was introduced. It advocates for increased collaboration between organisations working on short-term humanitarian aid and long-term international development. European governments support it, but humanitarian practitioners have mixed opinions. What do we know about this new concept in development work eight years later?**

by Cariene Joosten

However, some humanitarian organisations such as Doctors Without Borders, the Red Cross and UNHCR strongly resisted the idea of cooperation among different types of organisations. Alone: ‘Critical voices believe that politics should not be involved in humanitarian activities—however, it is crucial to consider what happens after the intervention. While Doctors Without Borders are excellent at providing aid during emergencies, they may not have concrete plans for the post-emergency period. This lack of planning can make their mandate challenging to fulfil. I witnessed a situation where they said they would deliver a programme to someone else, but there was no one else to take it on.’

Anne Judith Harrop, lead technical advisor of transforming fragilities at VSO International, agrees: ‘Humanitarian efforts that do not lead to development interventions mean that the causes of the humanitarian crisis remain unresolved. Therefore, we do not stop the cycle of humanitarian disaster.’

‘If drought causes food insecurity and we send food and water to keep people alive, but we do not preserve water or move to drought-resistant plants, the same crisis will occur once again... The development interventions seek to build resilience and prevent food insecurity, requiring food supply the next time a disaster happens. Both types are essential for long-term stability.’

‘In conflict-affected areas, we also need peace-building activities. Current approaches to development programming in fragile and conflict-affected contexts are insufficient to bring about long-term stability and peace. This is because they do not understand or consider the complexities of the conflict context and how it interplays with the development goal. It is important to understand the underlying grievances and tensions between groups to ensure that efforts towards peace are successful.’

‘Not considering these factors can lead to harm and prevent achieving positive peace. Interventions should be designed to anticipate potential disruptions and include activities that respond to the consequences of people’s stress. For instance, those who experience violence, conflict, environmental disasters, or displacement may require mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) interventions—in addition to developmental ones, as they are often traumatised by their experiences.’

‘It is important to provide trauma support to such individuals as it can greatly affect their ability to move forward in life. It is important to anticipate possible interruptions in programme implementation and have a plan in place to address them. In the event of a school flood, it’s essential to come up with a strategy to continue educating children. Similarly, in conflict-affected areas where it’s unsafe for women to work in their fields, it’s crucial to find ways to improve their livelihoods. Proper mitigation measures can prevent or minimise these disruptions.’

Climate change has severely affected the region on the border between Ethiopia and Kenya. Many people face starvation during severe droughts, resulting in a humanitarian crisis. As a result, this is one of the reasons the region, inhabited by millions of people, is prone to conflict and violence. Disregarding customary institutions and changes in political and administrative systems have also contributed to the conflict. The Triple Nexus approach has become increasingly prevalent where humanitarian, development, and peace efforts intersect.

‘The debate on the fact that too many humanitarian and development activities were not properly connected is ancient,’ says Massimo Alone, PhD researcher on education and Triple Nexus in Ethiopia. ‘It started about thirty years ago, in the late eighties. Before that, humanitarian aid and international development were distinct and separate entities.’

‘Humanitarian assistance focused on achieving immediate and short-term life-saving goals while adhering to the humanitarian principle of political independence. International development was more closely aligned with governments and focused on achieving longer-term objectives, such as the Millennium Goals. However, not much has been achieved in connecting humanitarian and development over the past decades.’

Government funders of humanitarian aid, especially the European Union—influenced by a coalition of Germany, the Scandinavian countries and others from the North—stated that programmes working towards addressing humanitarian needs and longer-term development goals should be encouraged. Both activities should consider protracted conflicts and promote a Humanitarian-Development-Peace approach in conflict-affected areas.

**The concept of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus** was first mentioned at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, in Istanbul. It marked a major shift in how the international community prevents human suffering by preparing for and responding to crises. Many humanitarian actors agreed to work across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus under the scope of the *Grand Bargain*—a unique agreement between some of the largest donors and humanitarian organisations. They committed to getting more means into the hands of people in need and improving the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action.

# ‘Why save people’s lives and abandon them later?’



Some organisations, including development actors, were concerned that by doing three things simultaneously, they would be done inadequately. 'But if you want to achieve sustainable change, you cannot see them separately,' Alone concurs. 'I worked in Palestine for nine consecutive years and saw that you cannot develop a long-term development approach if the conflict does not stop.'

'In the years I worked in Lebanon and Ethiopia, I also saw that people often look for easy solutions to problems that are not simple. They don't want to see the complexity, because many changes might be needed—which is painful. People are afraid they will lose something or will have to put in more effort because they have to do something new or different.'

'Throughout my career, I have seen too many programmes implemented in silos, without coordination with other organisations and a proper evaluation. These programmes could have been much more successful if they considered the overall picture of the context in which they were operating, if the teams running them were more aware of the root causes of those conflicts, and if there was better coordination among all the actors.'

'That is why I believe we need the Triple Nexus approach, it is the solution to complex problems. There is no point if we do not address the roots of these issues, which are primarily political.'

**How should it be done, then? 'Fragile and conflict-affected areas,'** Harrop says, 'are intricate environments that require a comprehensive understanding of the factors that drive risks and vulnerability. It is important to understand the different stakeholders involved, how they interact, and the root causes of conflict from multiple perspectives. This information is crucial in developing effective risk mitigation strategies and the design and implementation of programmes—a whole-person approach is critical.'

'Activities should be designed in advance to respond to these known vulnerabilities in the context following an analysis. The design should also include provisions to adapt and be flexible, should the context change to respond to the needs of primary actors and the operating context. For instance, during Covid, businesses pivoted to provide health information and new livelihood opportunities, such as producing hand sanitisers and masks, and shifting delivery to online instead of face-to-face.'

'Similarly, food insecurity commonly occurs, which prevents primary actors from attending programme interventions because

## 'Critical voices don't believe in the fact that politics should be involved in humanitarian activities'

they are too weak or need to try and find food or work. Education programmes could adapt and provide school feeding programmes both as humanitarian support and to show solidarity with the community. It will also encourage children to attend the programme interventions, thereby keeping it running and gaining maximum impact. The key is localising whole-person adaptive programming.'

Research by the Erasmus University Rotterdam on the Triple Nexus approach confirms that any response or plan must be based on context and an understanding of communities' experience. They also acknowledge the importance of national or subnational authority engagement, depending on how well authorities adhere to humanitarian principles. They argue that while the HDP nexus inherently must be contextualised, the overall organisation of how nexus operations take place and who provides policy and technical guidance needs centralisation.

And that flexible, longer-term funding is necessary, involving different actors in these processes, including civil society and NGOs. Alone, at that time working for Plan International, was involved in one of the European Union's first Triple Nexus designed programmes in education, from 2018 to 2022. 'The *Safe and Quality Education for Girls and Boys in Displacement Situations in Ethiopia and Somalia* project was part of the *BRICE (Building Resilience in Conflict-Affected Contexts)* programme.'

'It was the first ever attempt from the EU to finance education projects using a development approach, for more than four years. The idea was to build resilience and educational opportunities in fragile and crisis-affected environments. It worked and was a successful programme in many aspects—it allowed us to provide for the first time a four-year formal college qualification to refugee teachers who were not qualified to teach. Of course, with all the limitations you can have when it only concerns one project and not an entire sector that works that way.'

Today, different INGOs and governments, including the OECD, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, expressed their enthusiasm for complimentary humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actions. 'Triple Nexus is not simply an integration of three separated things, it is an approach,' concludes Alone. 'It is first thinking about what the roots of the problem are. If you work in a place where people are killing each other, you have to understand *why* they are killing each other. At the very least, there should be an approach that really and thoroughly examines all three components.'

'If you do not think about what will happen after an emergency, you are essentially not supporting the community. What is the point of saving lives if you are going to abandon them later? If they have nowhere to go and do not have hope? We simply cannot continue as we are doing because it does not produce the results we pretend or claim. There is no point in not talking about what needs to be done to address those conflicts, to address the deeply rooted problems in these societies and prevent long-term solutions.'



IPDHE community representatives and county officials from Sololo and Moyale, Kenya

**The project** *Integrating Peacebuilding, Development, and Humanitarian Efforts Across the Kenya-Ethiopia Cross Border (IPDHE)* addresses the interlinkages between humanitarian, development and peace. It contributes to a foundation for stability and resilience, on which long-term sustainable development and poverty reduction will be possible.

Joseph Sang is the VSO project manager for the IPDHE programme. He says: 'After a context and conflict assessment, the project starts with a "risk vulnerability assessment." This enables communities to identify and prioritise the risks and vulnerabilities from their perspective and identify what they see as solutions.'

'This whole-person approach links humanitarian, development, and peace priorities. The process is led by local volunteers, so that the programme is well rooted in society and is done with many different groups to ensure a range of perspectives are heard. The communities develop an action plan, in which we support them to deliver whilst working with duty-bearers. Communities often need support to develop the necessary knowledge and skills to become resilient to climate change.'

'It may include training on climate-resilient livelihoods, establishing seed banks, communication and conflict resolution skills, and building community networks to peacefully resolve disputes. It is the responsibility of the communities, along with those in positions of power, to implement these

action plans. VSO and its partners are there to assist, build connections, and offer support where needed. We will work with local governments and support them to respond to the needs of the communities they serve.'

'The project team supports communities and duty-bearers to deliver their action plans. They have supported communities to adapt their livelihoods to drought-resistant crops and to increase water harvesting to increase food security, resilience to drought and income. They have established and strengthened community peace committees to address local conflicts and improve communication between rivaling clans and worked with traditional conflict resolution systems overlooked by local governments.'

'By creating trusted, traditional spaces for people to meet each other, grievances are discussed, experiences shared, and prejudices demystified. The project also responded to the crisis by providing shelter and food to displaced people. Lastly, to reduce the risk to the project that people impacted by food insecurity do not attend activities, nutritious food was provided.'

'The key element to the IPDHE Triple Nexus design is localisation: local communities and their leaders are supported by local NGOs and duty-bearers. The approach is adaptable and flexible, with crisis modifiers that allow for quick responses to emerging needs. The focus is on the priorities and needs of the primary actors, ensur-

ing that support is centred on the people who need it most.'

'Over the past years, NGOs and donors implementing peacebuilding initiatives have supported and worked through different peace groups to implement their interventions. This has sometimes led to challenges in the legitimacy and effectiveness of the structures.'

'In Kenya,' Sang says, 'the deputy county commissioner of Moyale, in consultation with the local peace actors, recently consolidated existing peace groups into the sub-county peace forum and cross-border peace committees. Here, some members of those committees double up as members of the Moyale Sub-County Peace Forum.'

'The double representation presents a good opportunity for linking the sub-county peace forum to the cross-border committee. The cross-border peace committee (with representation from Kenya and Ethiopia) is a more acceptable entity in addressing cross-border conflict.'

*Integrating Peacebuilding, Development, and Humanitarian Efforts Across the Kenya-Ethiopia Cross Border (IPDHE) is implemented by VSO, together with local partner organisations Horn of Africa Development Initiative (Kenya) and the Centre for Development and Capacity Building (Ethiopia), and funded by the Austrian Development Cooperation*



Rahma Wako (VSO IPDHE community volunteer, on the left) and Noor Ali Omar (project officer, Hodi Africa)



# Breaking barriers: From being seen to being heard.



For years, discriminatory social norms against women and girls, fuelled by instability, have continued to put them at a disadvantage in the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, this is changing. Programmes with a gender-resilience nexus approach by development organisations are igniting change for women and girls towards economic development, meaningful participation in decision-making, and peace-building processes.

by Elizabeth Kameo and Nicera Wanjiru

Anifa Kavira Mwenge resides in Karisimbi municipality in South Kivu, Goma. She refers to herself as a 'female leader, female entrepreneur, and a free woman' in her community. Ten years ago, she would have never imagined such a description fitting her. A professional nurse, Mwenge settled for being a mother and a stay-at-home spouse as was dictated by her husband after marriage. Today, things are different, and she is one of the local leaders in her municipality. She owns and manages a pharmacy set up with support from her husband.

Economic and political achievements, she says, were made possible through sensitisation from the *Mwanamke Amani Na Usalama* (MANU, meaning: Women, Peace, and Security) programme, and the resulting mentality change of her husband. 'I used to be a stay-at-home mother and wife. However, after participating in the programme and sensitisation, my husband recognised that I too could take part in decision-making, at home and in the community,' she says.

'It was after this that I gained the confidence to tell my husband that I could play an essential role.' She is a member of Women Rights Activists, president of the Association of Muslim Women in her community mosque, and secretary of the Muslim Women Association. Before the MANU programme, women and girls in this region were considered inferior as compared to their male counterparts. Discriminatory social norms meant women and girls were seen but not heard.

**Women are not just members of local peace councils. They issue early alerts and denounce cases of violence and conflict in their communities. They also function as mediators; they have become human rights watchdogs**

Women could not ascend to any leadership posts, and early marriages were the order of the day. Mwenge attests that acquiring knowledge and information has changed relationships between men and women at household and community levels. She describes her current relationship with her husband as a 'collaboration.' He encourages and supports her in her economic and political development. Mwenge believes her economic independence, made possible by her husband's involvement, has also played a significant role in her political participation.

'This would not have been possible if I was still a stay-at-home mother and wife. Men need to accept that women can be part of the decision-making processes. Once my husband accepted this, his attitude changed,' she says. According to her, while changing mentalities has not been easy, great strides have been made towards women's participation.

The impressive rise of women in decision-making positions is evidence of this. 'I used to participate in community development activities, but it was only after joining the MANU 2 programme that I understood women could participate in the decision-making process of their communities. Before, like other women, I was ignorant, but this is not the case anymore.'

Activities of the second phase included training, sensitisation, reflection groups, and advocacy. Lack of economic independence and men's mentality towards women and girls were the biggest challenges facing women in accessing decision-making positions in their communities, Mwenge says. 'Today, there is a mentality change. However, the economic challenge women face persists. To access a position of power, one must have the financial means, because it is with these that one advances.'

Economic development is instrumental to women's participation in decision-making and peacebuilding as it shifts the power dynamics within the household. It also facilitates their participation in public spaces and enhances their credibility and status within the community. This independence allows them to confidently participate in decision-making and peace-building processes. Economically independent women are perceived as more responsible, capable, and powerful—that opens more space for them in the decision-making process.

When women start working outside the home and gain financial independence, they improve their agency. That includes their confidence, particularly in public speaking, and their capacities on topics on finance, savings, governance, and women's rights. Additionally, economic development also contributes to social cohesion and peacebuilding. Women can see their role in the community changing as their economic independence grows, leading to a better-defined, positive identity in the community and harmonious relationships with those around them.

Ensuring that women living in conflict and post-conflict areas are economically independent is essential to sustainably promoting women's rights, peacebuilding, and conflict prevention. Women will most likely engage when they have economic independence because their access to resources will pave the way for their recognition in society, as is Mwenge's case.

Today, she encourages other women to seek economic independence—hers has paved the way to fully participate in the community's peace-building and decision-making processes, conflict prevention, recovery and relief.

Since men and boys are key actors in gender transformation, they can either be obstacles or allies. Within the MANU programme, they are engaged to become allies through sensitisation programmes, training, and youth clubs, leading to a noticeable transformation. Since its first phase, MANU has included CARE's men-engagement approach in its programme. CARE has used it to fight toxic masculinities, question patriarchy, facilitate individuals' transformation, and promote societal inclusivity since 2013.

**Engaging men and boys is essential**, because it enables addressing deep-rooted social norms, enhances programme effectiveness, helps prevent gender-based violence, prevents backlash against women for gender equality gains, and promotes the psychological well-being of men and families.



Engaging men and boys to become allies towards achieving gender equality and rejecting toxic masculinity is a critical step toward achieving women's inclusion. When engaged, they reinforce positive behaviour, which supports and advances gender equality.

One of CARE's priorities in engaging them is to promote their role in changing discriminatory social norms towards women and girls. The other priorities are a contribution to gender equality, the promotion of the participation of women and girls in the consolidation of peace and security, and improved protection against gender-based violence.

**With more women in decision-making positions**, there is a better commitment towards inclusive, gender-sensitive justice systems. It also gives them more confidence to come forth and highlight issues of GBV. The guiding principle for male engagement in challenging gender inequality is shifting beliefs, behaviours, and practices at household and community levels for gender equality.

Initiatives which engage men and boys encourage them to abandon harmful stereotypes that discriminate against women, embrace respectful healthy relations, and support the human rights of all. In this approach, men and boys are integrated as allies for gender equality, especially towards economic opportunities for women, prevention of HIV and AIDS and of violence against women and girls (including child marriage and female genital mutilation), and family planning initiatives.

Their engagement reduces barriers women and girls face in building their agency, addresses inequitable power relations, and ensures sustainable changes in power dynamics and social structures. Advocating for women's equality in all sectors is crucial for societies. It involves everyone since it is not only women who suffer from male-controlled attitudes. Promoting gender equality requires the involvement of every individual. Engaging men is crucial as it helps eliminate the obstacles that discriminate against women.

Men washing their clothes at a community laundry bay



When men become role models and champions of change, it inspires others to follow suit and facilitates the development of a more equitable society. Since they can also experience vulnerabilities due to their identities, they also benefit when harmful norms are challenged, thus the significance of promoting positive masculinity—allowing men and boys to use their physical and emotional strength to champion inclusive and equal behaviour for stronger communities.

Nelly Mbangi, a lawyer and focal point person at SMM, says today they see positive changes in the attitudes of men and boys in supporting women's participation in decision-making and peace-building processes, as well as their economic independence. 'There is a change in the local leadership councils brought about by the MANU programme. Before, the leaders were only men, with women acting merely as observers. Now women are part of these processes,' she observes.

**The programme is changing the system** by engaging men and boys to address barriers that hinder women's participation in decision-making and peace-building. The EMB approach has helped to deconstruct patterns and messages of violence around which masculine identity is built. It has led to men's and young boys' acquisition of attitudes and behaviours that support gender equality. It has also led to establishing dialogues between men and women to identify issues within households and communities and find joint resolutions to promote positive masculinity.

It further emphasises the importance of women's participation in conflict and post-conflict decision-making processes to align their rights with sustainable peacebuilding. Mbangi says changing social norms which are discriminatory against women, such as restriction of women's participation in decision-making processes, and the rights of girls to education and early marriage, were a key component during the first phase of the programme. That, she says, is the reason phase two of the MANU programme focuses on preventing violence against women and on issues that promote peace.

**The MANU programme is implemented by Sauti Ya Mama Mukongomani (SMM) and Parlement d'Enfants (PARDE), meaning Children's Parliament, in collaboration with CARE DRC.** The objective is to ensure women's and girls' meaningful participation in conflict prevention, resolution, mediation, peacebuilding, and protection.

This objective is supported by the fact that incorporating gender adequately in peacebuilding initiatives is essential to make peace more inclusive and ensure effectiveness and sustainability.

According to the report *From the Ground Up: Women's Roles in Local Peacebuilding in Afghanistan, Liberia, Nepal, Pakistan and Sierra Leone*, there is also evidence that women can play a particularly important role at the community level in building peace and social cohesion, and should be supported to bring these skills to national level peace processes.

Women's participation in processes can 'increase the chances that the community will buy into the process and that the root cause of conflict will be addressed, particularly as women can bring a different perspective to that of warring factions regarding what peace and security mean,' says the ISS report *Sustaining peace: Harnessing the power of South Sudanese women*.

### An Engaged Man's Story

**'I am an example** of an engaged man. Before, I never helped my wife with household chores. This has changed. My wife now tells other women about the change and how our home is peaceful. We support each other,' says Calvin Balunza Balume.

The change in his home, he says, is reflected within the homes of other engaged men. Consequently, this change has trickled down into the communities and led to a mentality change and respect for women through changing discriminatory social norms.

These norms include, but are not restricted to barring women from participating in the decision-making processes, engaging in economic activities, and child marriage. This means girls only access primary education, putting them at a disadvantage in meaningful future participation within their communities.

Balume, a pastor at the Evangelical Church of Christ, is a MANU programme participant and a member of the reflection group for men's engagement in Katoyi, Karisimbi municipality, Goma.

He says participating in training for engaged men led to his acknowledgement of the importance of changing social norms. Today, he organises monthly training sessions for men and young boys.

Calvin Balunza Balume's engagement and that of other men in changing the discriminatory social norms has translated into communities' commitment to ensuring that the status of women and girls becomes participatory and that women's rights are fully respected.

Discrimination against women and girls perpetuates violence and is one of the causes of gender inequality by hindering their decision-making participation. Poverty persists not only because resources required to eliminate it are not made available, but also because of the way societies are organised. Policies, practices, power relations and mental models keep inequality in place and do not allow for all people living in poverty to develop their capabilities and pursue their well-being.

By addressing root causes that will support women's economic development, MANU seeks to address those conditions that keep poverty in place to bring about a systems change. The programme addresses harmful social norms, such as early marriages, which hinder girls' access to higher education and women's participation in the economic sector. It seeks to provide an enabling environment to ensure women's economic independence.

Since social norms are part of the root causes that hinder women and girls from participating in decision-making, the programme seeks to engage men and boys in transforming this system. Their engagement is significant in paving the way for girls' education and women's economic development. However, social norms alone will not be enough. They should be complemented by influencing formal institutions on laws and policies.

**Over the years, women's economic independence** has been recognised by development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding frameworks as significant to ensure women participate in the peacebuilding process. Their inclusions lead to more peaceful and resilient communities. In 2000, the UN Security Council passed *Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS)*. It calls for women's participation in peacebuilding, protection from human rights violations, and access to justice.

Member states were called upon to implement National Action Plans (NAPs). The DRC adopted its most recent NAP in 2018 for the period 2019-'22. Within the MANU programme, the focus is on implementing the UN *1325 Resolution* in the context of conflict and post-conflict areas in the communities. In 2022, the DRC reported a breakthrough in the implementation of its NAP, reporting a 27 per cent rise in women in government. A woman was elected speaker of the National Assembly for the first time.

According to Mbangi, having these laws in place, both national and international, has been crucial in the advancements in women's and girls' rights in communities where the programme is implemented. But amidst the progress challenges remain, which Mbangi

says are linked to security, peace, and protection of women. However, one remarkable success stands out: the integration of women within several local authorities into the local peace councils in their communities.

'Women are not just members of them, they issue early alerts and denounce cases of violence and conflict in their community. They also function as mediators; they have become human rights watchdogs,' she reveals. She adds there is change right from the household level, which creates a ripple effect of change in the communities. 'We see it amongst the men in how they treat their wives. They let them speak out and participate in community decision-making activities. Men involve their wives in obtaining family property and finances by discussing and consulting with them,' she remarks.

By involving their wives in obtaining family property, they are, in turn, granting women access to assets, which is crucial for women to achieve economic independence. Through approaches incorporating training and sensitisation sessions for men and young boys, the programme has set off sparks that have ignited a string of change, as proven by Mwangi's story. It starts with women becoming advocates in their households, within their families, communities, and beyond. From being heard at home, women are then heard at all levels of society.

The experience built up over the phases of the programme shows that even in contexts that are troubled by ongoing conflict, there are approaches that can combine development and peacebuilding successfully. They are vital in combining working on social norms to improve women's self-confidence, gender relations, and economic independence, thereby preventing conflict. Gender inequalities, violence, and women's lack of economic development are part of the major root causes that hinder their full participation in the decision-making and peace-building process.

The MANU approaches work on the basis that addressing root causes in conflict and post-conflict contexts is significant if perceptions that hold women and girls back are to be changed. When these approaches are used to address the root causes of gender inequality, they lead to sustainable solutions. These ensure women's rights are respected and lasting peace from the household to the communities, and inevitably to the national level.

In communities in DRC where the programme has been implemented, this started at the individual and household levels. It built its way up to the community levels, with a promise to create ripples in a pond that widens up to provincial and national levels.





# Resolving Land Disputes in Burundi's Post-Conflict Era



In the charming hills of Burundi, land is scarce. This not only limits livelihood prospects, but also creates a fertile ground for conflict. Ninety percent of the populace is heavily reliant on agriculture, making land tenure security crucial for human rights, particularly for returning refugees, widowed household heads, and persons with disabilities. To this end, local and international NGOs, alongside the Burundian government, are championing the cause by empowering communities in resolving land disputes, fostering peace, and transforming lives.

Text by Emmanuel Mandebo  
Images by McWilliams Wasswa

Angelina Nzikobanyanka, a widowed mother of seven, underwent a fourteen-year court battle with her brother-in-law. For over a decade, the man threatened her livelihood by claiming ownership of her deceased husband's land and taking control of it. Today, the forty-five-year-old takes pride in having forgiven him. Her primary source of income is agriculture, which is also the case for most Burundians. Therefore, when she lost her land, she found herself in a helpless state where she could not provide for her children.

Despite her attempts to regain it through legal avenues, bribery allegations marred her attempts. In June 2023, she decided to pursue an outside court mediation using the local structures in her community. 'The mediation process was not complicated at all. It was resolved within a month, and I was not asked for any bribe,' narrates the resident of Muyange zone, Nyanza Lac district in southern Burundi. Typical out-of-court mediations adopt a less formal procedure. The objective is not for one party to win, but for the opposing parties to arrive at a consensus while maintaining relationships.

Nzikobanyanka states that she became aware of this procedure and how it works after attending an awareness-raising event organised by ZOA, an international NGO based in the Netherlands. In collaboration with partner organisations, ZOA aims to resolve land rights conflicts peacefully within Burundi's communities. Mediation stands as a beacon for them, as they strive to resolve land disputes while preserving peace and preventing further discord. It fosters dialogue and amicable resolutions, a departure from the adversarial nature of formal courts.

In addition to successfully regaining her land, Nzikobanyanka's efforts led to a peaceful reunion of a family embroiled in conflict for over a decade. This highlights the importance of addressing root causes, such as land rights, during the peacebuilding process in conflict and post-conflict times. Today, she recommends this mediation to members of her community.

'After the crises of 1988 and 1997,' explains Servillien Minani, the project manager at *Amahoro @ Scale*, 'many Burundians fled to the neighbouring countries. The repatriation movement began in 2005, leading to a mass return. And upon return, the repatriates often found their land occupied by strangers and some residents who had stayed behind.'

*Amahoro @ Scale* is a Dutch-funded land tenure registration project, which includes conflict resolution. The government, backed by NGOs and international aid, considered post-conflict measures, such as land reforms and simpler tenure systems, to ensure land rights and ease disputes.

In 2006, the Commission Nationale des Terres et autres Biens (CNTB) was established by the government of Burundi to address land conflicts between returnees (repatriates) and residents. Initially, the CNTB encouraged repatriates and residents occupying the land to share it. However, after a change in leadership, they started promoting that all the land be returned only to the repatriates. This approach increased hostility, despair, and disruption of the peacebuilding progress within the communities. The issue required a sustainable solution to address land rights and promote community peace.

In late 2013, ZOA initiated land tenure registration projects in Makamba province in collaboration with the local partner MIPAREC. These projects are implemented in coordination with the government to minimise conflicts and motivate farmers to invest in and make the most of their land. One of the approaches, currently proving pivotal in bringing about peaceful resolutions of land disputes, was used in Nyanza Lac district, with Maurice Nyiram-

Records kept in the land registry at Mabanda district



Land measuring exercise at Nyanza Lac district, Makamba province

birwa leading a land measuring exercise. He is one of the casual workers trained in land measurement. This exercise is conducted in the presence of Commission de Reconnaissance Collinaire (CRC) members.

Land measurement is done after the committee has resolved conflicts over land through mediation between the conflicting parties. In this case, Bosco Buchunu, the land owner, responded to Nyiramirwa's questions in front of an attentive audience of close neighbours and community members. This is conducted under the committee's supervision to ensure peaceful proceedings. With a GPS device, Nyiramirwa and his team meticulously mark boundaries across Buchunu's two hectare land, securing coordinates and planting markers.

After three hours of thorough plotting, they conclude the process. Minutes of the exercise, with the digital data, are then sent to the district land administration office, which processes all the data to establish and produce the land certificate. For Buchunu, the certification brings relief, echoing the sentiments of other residents of Nyanza Lac.

Philemon Niyonzima is the head of the land administration office in the district. He mentions that so far, just over fifty percent of the land here has been registered since the *Amahoro @ Scale* project commenced in December 2021. 'Initially,' he says, 'the inhabitants hesitated due to limited knowledge about the registration initiative, but sensitisation programmes prompted increased participation. Collaboration with MIPAREC and ZOA also streamlined our work, fostering a strong relationship from the grassroots to the district level.'

The first approach for land tenure registration is the systematic method. It involves measuring and certifying all land at the village level, moving from one village to another, and eventually covering all district villages. 'During the execution of this approach, many conflicts that were previously silent, became very prominent.'

**Decades of turmoil and land-related issues have transformed into a statement of reconciliation, justice, and hope**

To this end, communal commissions (CRCs) were established by the government to take charge of addressing land conflicts at the local level. Because of their proximity to the grassroots communities, their relevance in addressing land-related issues cannot be underestimated. The registration project, therefore, revitalised and trained them. These community structures are present in every village; they have resolved and continue to resolve conflicts that arise before, during, and after land measurement and certification.

'It is crucial to resolve those conflicts, because land subject to a dispute cannot be certified until the dispute is determined,' says Isaac Bizimungu, project manager at MIPAREC. A case in Rimbo village, Nyanza Lac district, illustrates a mediation session. Approximately one hundred inhabitants assemble at a semi-permanent structure akin to the village court, designated for the day's discourse on land conflicts.

Guided by the village land recognition committee, the session





Angelina Nzikobanyanka

**‘The mediation process was not complicated at all. It was resolved within a month, and I was not asked for any bribe’**

registration and certification of their land at the district land administration office. An officer from the district administration carries out the necessary inquiries and in the absence of conflict, measures the land and processes the data needed for the certificate.

The individual approach is carried out by government staff of the district cadastre office—that requires advance payment by the land owner. From 2013, land tenure registration projects spanning all six districts within Makamba province in southern Burundi have been implemented. The aim is to secure land ownership and reduce land-related conflicts, with Nyanza Lac being the sixth and last district.

In addition, six district land administration offices have been established. They have registered about 176,000 land parcels and resolved nearly twenty thousand disputes between 2013 and 2023. The ZOA Land Projects have, without doubt, contributed immensely to peacebuilding in Burundi.

**Nicelata Nizigama, deputy chairperson** of the Mabanda Resident Court, acknowledges the impact of these interventions, primarily in land registration and dispute resolution. ‘The project activities supported by our local partners and the various NGOs have facilitated easier handling of land conflicts and improved overall efficiency. Their approach in mediating conflicts at the village level significantly reduced cases reaching the courts, especially among returnees unfamiliar with legal procedures,’ she says.

Highlighting gender inequality issues prevalent in Burundi’s customary laws, she explains how the project’s sensitisation programmes have helped transform perceptions. ‘They underscore fairness irrespective of gender, educating communities on equal land rights for all children and challenging patriarchal norms.

The initiatives have also defined land ownership, distinguishing family land from individual ownership, and encouraged equal rights to land for all,’ she adds. Nizigama continues to say that by expediting land registration processes and issuing certificates, the initiatives have streamlined legal proceedings and dispute resolution, minimising lengthy litigations.

Jean Pierre Harungimana, the administrator of Mabanda district, acknowledges the pivotal role ZOA and MIPAREC played in resolving land disputes and improving community harmony. He points out that, in the past, land conflicts were regular due to the sharing of land between returnees and residents, which resulted in the underutilisation of land for agricultural purposes, due to fear.

‘Previously, the district administration dealt with overwhelming numbers of land-related disputes, but the effort of the partners has drastically reduced those,’ says Harungimana. He adds that the land certification has increased security and allowed microfinance institutions to provide loans based on the land certificate, which is favourable to the communities. According to him, the project activ-

ities have been aligned with the district’s five-year plan, prioritising reconciliation and social cohesion.

A partnership that not only addressed community needs, but also improved women’s inclusion in land ownership and the decision-making processes. They have also led to the restoration of dignity, hope, and trust among community members. Appreciative of their role, Harungimana stresses the importance of ongoing efforts to maintain community cohesion and gender equity in land rights. He further highlights the need for increased community visits by the implementing partners, recognising the significance of follow-ups for sustainability.

**Annonciate Twagirayezu, the project manager** for ZOA in Makamba province, states: ‘In addition to streamlining land tenure security in the peace-building process, our other intended outcomes are improved agricultural productivity. I can confidently state that we are still on track.’

However, she notes that a few challenges, including operational limitations such as national fuel shortage and currency depreciation, have caused delays in their project. She adds that the lack of a clear legal framework for succession in Burundi has also made it hard to implement some of the project activities, especially regarding enforcing women’s rights.

These approaches, in collaboration with the government, community organisations, and NGOs like ZOA and MIPAREC, are helping find sustainable and peaceful solutions by addressing land rights conflicts despite the challenges. Through collaborative efforts with local structures, repatriates and residents can clarify land ownership and resolve conflicts fairly and harmoniously. This approach was successfully implemented in Rimbo village through mediation, resulting in a peaceful resolution for all parties involved.

Implementing systematic land tenure registration has streamlined procedures for land tenure registration and certification, leading to reduced conflicts and enhanced unity. The journey from conflict to certainty in Burundi is a remarkable testament to the power of collaborative efforts and the resilience of communities.

Decades of turmoil and land-related issues have transformed into a statement of reconciliation, justice, and hope. The innovative attempts at streamlining land tenure led by the Burundian government, NGOs, and international partners have resolved land disputes and fostered unity and social cohesion.

Stories like that of Angelina Nzikobanyanka’s triumphant tale of reclaiming her late husband’s land after years of struggle, exemplify the indomitable human spirit and the positive impact of collective initiatives. The transformative humanitarian, developmental, and peace-focused endeavours highlight solidarity and the partnerships’ profound impact in addressing intricate issues and peacebuilding.

As challenges persist, the commitment to ongoing efforts is unwavering. Herman Kamphuis, country director of ZOA in Burundi, says their vision is to spread these efforts nationwide, reflecting a dedication to empowering local initiatives for lasting impact and autonomy.

**Burundi’s tumultuous history** is deeply entwined with ethnic tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi communities. After gaining independence from Belgium in 1962, the nation experienced recurring bouts of violence and political unrest. The 1993 civil war was sparked by the assassination of president Melchior Ndadaye, a Hutu. It resulted in widespread massacres and further deepened ethnic divisions.

Efforts towards peace and reconciliation ensued, marked by the 2000 *Arusha Agreement*, which aimed at power-sharing among factions. Ethnic strife remained a core issue, with the conflict persisting until the last rebel group, FNL, signed a ceasefire in 2006. The legacy of Burundi’s history is one of ethnic tensions and political challenges, underscoring the complexities that arose from the longstanding Hutu-Tutsi divide.

Mediation session at Rimbo village, Nyanza Lac district





# Listening to local voices requires coming closer

The Sahel region is in flux. It has witnessed political instability and security challenges with coups and conflicts in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Sudan. The disruption of security arrangements and the closure of civil society spaces pose significant challenges. How can civil society work in this volatile environment? And what, if anything, can large donor bodies like the European Union do to help?

Text by Bram Posthumus  
Artwork by AbdulWadud Bayo

Over the past three years, the Sahel region has experienced a series of political upheavals and security challenges. In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, three elected governments were removed from power in 2020, 2022, and 2023 respectively—and additionally, there were two more coups in Mali and Burkina Faso. The death of the autocrat Idriss Déby Itno of Chad in battle also added to the instability. As a result, existing security arrangements, including the G5 Sahel Force comprising these four countries plus Mauritania, were disrupted.

Currently, there is a full-blown war happening in Sudan, leading to an enduring refugee crisis in Chad, Algeria, and Mauritania. The entire Sahel region is experiencing a surge in terrorist activity, while two military governments have requested the deployment of foreign mercenaries. Moreover, the space for civil society activity has been closed down. In light of these circumstances, one may wonder if any useful measures can be taken to address the situation.

Representatives of peacebuilding civil society organisations and groups that wish to promote good governance are simultaneously realistic and optimistic. ‘It’s not easy,’ says Roger Minoungou. He runs the *Sahel Project* from Ouagadougou in his country, Burkina Faso. ‘We have serious issues, as some areas of the country have become inaccessible. On the other hand, state actions have resulted in some trunk roads being freed and reopened.’

Away from the capital, in the northern town of Ouahigouya, the circumstances are similar. Kadiatou Ouédraogo runs the Association féminine pour le développement du Burkina Faso (AFEDÉB), established in 2000 to fight against gender-based violence. She notes: ‘The security situation has meant that we no longer have access to certain localities. Inhabitants from several nearby villages have moved into town and developed a resilience that permits them to continue with their lives.’

‘This includes ensuring access to sufficient food through international humanitarian interventions, which a focus on emergency assistance, while also supporting income-generating activities to prepare individuals for their eventual return to their communities.’

As some areas are becoming physically accessible again, the expression space for civil society is decreasing. Military governments throughout the region refuse to engage in dialogue with those they consider ‘terrorists,’ complicating the process of reconciliation for peace-builders.

Following the coup in Niger, similar assessments have been made there as well. Boubacar Illiasou is project manager at the prominent pro-transparency body ROTAB (Réseau des organisations pour la transparence et analyse budgétaire), that has also been collecting data on victims of violence in the very troubled Tilabéri and Tahoua regions near the Malian border.

‘Security,’ he says, ‘is a major problem for those who record what has been done to these communities; acts like murder and theft. They are threatened by the state security forces and by non-state armed groups who look very unfavourably on this work. They see data collectors as the enemy.’

Throughout the Sahel, reporting from areas declared military zones has been rendered virtually impossible, as these have been formally or effectively declared off-limits for independent journalists and researchers. In many ways, it is a continuation of existing policies. Before the first coup in Burkina Faso, its parliament had already adopted a gag law in 2019, banning reporting from conflict zones.

However, Illiasou points out that the international response to the coup in his country in July ’23 has caused another problem: ‘We are having difficulties as a result of the sanctions put in place against Niger afterwards, especially by regional organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and we face challenges in obtaining funds needed to carry out our work. As you may have noticed during our conversation, we have to deal with frequent power cuts that can occur at any moment—because our neighbour to the north, Nigeria, has reduced most of our electricity supply.’

‘What is the EU able to contribute in attempts to make states *more accountable to the citizens?*’

Something similar is now happening with the European Union. ‘We have great relations, but those have been suspended following the coup, which is regrettable.’ The new strategy for the Sahel, adopted in April ’21 by the European Council, focuses on governance issues, security sector reform, and human rights. It provides scope for working with civil society organisations and local governments.

It should serve the EU in its efforts to help bring about stability and security in the Sahel. It is a departure from the previous approach, adopted ten years earlier, which was built around combating terrorism through military means, so it is an interesting step towards a different—and hopefully more successful—strategy. A 2021 briefing written for the European Parliament about the new one notes that the *previous* one did not bring the expected success; a road towards that is through a more proactive approach to engaging civil society.





**‘The post-coup period can be seen as an opportunity for actors like the EU to use their local and international relations to leverage change’**

**Hans Rouw, who leads the *Protection of Civilians* programme at PAX, believes practical steps are needed to make it all happen. ‘The ambition is there, but tangible arrangements are still to be made—is there someone available to talk to civil society representatives in Brussels or locally?’ He wants another aspect addressed. ‘What is the EU able to contribute in attempts to make states more accountable to the citizens? What you find so often in the Sahel is that there is no social contract between the state and the citizens. Can outsiders understand the situation and help improve it?’**

Perhaps the real question is whether the EU is equipped to bring about this kind of rapprochement between the state and the people it governs. Whatever the case, the Sahel context, more than anything, requires a holistic approach that takes into account the views and ideas of the communities that have been directly hit by violence, from whichever side it came. It is a point that civil society representatives in the Sahel have been making repeatedly.

As Illiassou already mentioned, there have been successful cooperation efforts between EU representatives and civil society based on good personal relations, but as a round table meeting in Ouagadougou in September 2022 revealed, there are no structural ties between the EU’s growing efforts in the Sahel and civil society organisations in the region. No mechanism exists to ensure views and visions of civil society find their way to the circles of decision-makers in Brussels or the capitals of the EU member states—and that is regrettable.

It is important to involve civil society organisations in all the main policy areas identified in the new strategy, including governance and human rights, security and the rule of law, politics and diplomacy, and the fight against radicalisation and extremist violence. Their input can greatly benefit all these interventions.

As Ouédraogo asserts: ‘There exist ways in which civil society already makes contributions at the national level here in Burkina Faso; there are communication channels available, citizens use radio, television, and social media. We have structures for public hearings, fora, and the likes, as frameworks for exchange and discussion.’

**All the EU needs to do is to open its doors** to those existing structures and mechanisms and become part of the conversation. ‘You cannot make such analyses from a distance’, is the way Roger Minoungou puts it. There is a great willingness to share experiences gained from the work civil society has done on the ground and the insights collected. ‘To arrive at a good conflict analysis, you will need the views of the communities. You must listen to them—what we now have are isolated projects.’

That would, for instance, require being familiar with the fact that the worst affected areas also tend to be the ones that have been the most marginalised economically and in terms of development. And here we arrive at the same point, again: the need for a holistic approach to which civil society organisations can contribute greatly. A lot of experience has been gained, not only in collecting data, as has been done in Niger and Burkina Faso.

‘We have experience in de-radicalisation and in conflict prevention,’ says Minoungou, ‘we bring together traditional and religious leaders, women, and youth for dialogue to discuss issues and to advance solutions, such as improving access to justice. We have managed to maintain good contacts with authorities like the Ministry of Justice—that is how we add value.’ The EU delegation holds office in a building behind a high wall in central Ouagadougou, where he highlights this when he meets with the representatives.

PAX is busy repositioning itself in this fast-moving political, geopolitical, and security landscape called the Sahel. Its presence is readily appreciated, as Ouédraogo confirms: ‘We find the theory of change PAX employs quite effective. It permits the identification of the problems that communities experience in various parts of the country. Involving members of our communities in problem

analysis enables PAX to become familiar with what is ailing these communities at a deeper level.’

What she specifically has in mind is the fight against radicalisation, also mentioned by Minoungou. ‘PAX have been helpful in that respect, while we were realising our projects for de-radicalisation.’ Meanwhile, the hardening of the juntas’ positions has complicated matters, especially after Kidal, the de facto Tuareg rebel capital in north-eastern Mali, was captured in November. It will only embolden the juntas to opt for the purely military approach, a direction the EU is trying to leave behind. Overall, the absence of Mali from current civil society-driven peacebuilding efforts is keenly felt.

**After all, the Sahel conflict originated there,** and developments in Mali are key to the entire region. Be that as it may, the focus for now is on sharing experiences within the existing PAX network—a regional meeting was held in early December to that effect, in Ouagadougou. Participants from six countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Togo, Benin, and Côte d’Ivoire) focussed on reinforcing collaboration among civil society actors in West Africa.

Other themes include more and better engagement with the European Union. Hans Rouw reiterates: ‘We would like to see the EU play a more prominent role, taking into account the more all-encompassing approach it seeks.’ The participants at the Ouagadougou meeting were also keen to engage with the regional body ECOWAS, which has an elaborate counter-terrorism strategy and is preparing a standby force to intervene, when and where necessary.

That potentially opens yet another diplomatic can of worms, as Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali have formed a parallel alliance called AES (Alliance des états sahéliens), which is not recognised by ECOWAS.

Because things are moving so fast, the risks are that structures serving as bases for policymaking cease to exist before the policy papers are printed. The EU’s Sahel strategy leans on the concept

of the G5 Sahel, a random grouping of one Maghreb country (Mauritania), one member of the Economic Community of Central African States (Chad) and three ECOWAS member states (Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger), now run by military juntas. Mali blew up this grouping by withdrawing in May 2022, while Burkina Faso and Niger left in the beginning of December—the two remaining members formally buried it on the sixth, that month.

Illiassou argues that it is precisely in these states of flux that intervention can work better. ‘The post-coup period can be seen as an opportunity for actors like the EU to use their local and international relations to leverage change. Use existing ties with civil society organisations to lobby for a better democracy, now is the time for a real debate.’

ROTAB members in Niger—including Illiassou—found themselves regularly arrested and inhumanely treated by police when they were exposing corruption or human rights violations by the previous governments that outsiders characterised as ‘democratic.’ Similar to Burkina Faso with its gag laws and Mali with its excessively high levels of corruption, these all happened during the reign of elected presidents. Few want that type of political class back in power. They want something better, and this is the opportunity to work towards that aim.

Pressure from the European Parliament shifted Europe’s security strategy away from the military and towards human rights, governance, access to justice and the like. Similar shifts may occur regarding migration, which the EU declares ‘central to EU foreign policy in the region,’ but which nobody on the ground in the region identifies as a problem.

Consensus is found in the notion that a stable and relatively prosperous Sahel will certainly be beneficial for the continents on both sides of the Mediterranean. The last decade has been a nightmare for the people living in the Sahel—they shouldn’t have to endure another one.







Anne Judith Harrop

# The Peace Nexus— significant or not?

by Elizabeth Kameo

While the concept of the Peace Nexus is not new, it has gained momentum in the last decade. However, its effectiveness is still in question. Corita Corbijn, Anne Judith Harrop, Marjanne de Haan, and Messina Laurette Manirakiza provide an overview of the nexus and assess the achievements, obstacles, and gaps in this approach.

In September 2023, in the Central African Republic, two factions of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) began the process of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration, which included their repatriation to Uganda. The transition towards peace was a collaborative and cohesive effort by PAX and Action Pour la Promotion Rurale. The LRA is a Ugandan rebel group led by Joseph Kony.

It has waged a twenty-year-long insurgency in which it has killed tens of thousands of civilians, abducted over twenty thousand children as soldiers, porters, and sex slaves, and displaced over 1.8 million people in northern Uganda. The rebels fled the country after failed peace talks in 2006—they passed through South Sudan and Congo before settling in the Central African Republic.

Although it may take time for organisations to play a role like the one mentioned above, it highlights the significance of such an approach. 'It shows that committing to long-term conflict transformation and peace can yield unexpected opportunities,' Marjanne de Haan says, 'because we had built trust by integrating former rebels in communities in the DRC-CAR border region over many years. This intervention was unexpected, emphasising the importance of prioritising peacebuilding.'

De Haan is the programme manager of the Dutch-funded Strengthening Civil Courage consortium at PAX. 'If you look at the current state of the world,' she continues, 'we are not on the right track. However, it depends on whom you ask and how you view this. At PAX, our main concern is the increasing pressure on civic space. Also, I have not looked at statistics or data, but it feels like conflict situations are on the rise. Gaza is demonstrating how extremely complicated it is to effectively address and end violent conflict and how it often implicates and involves us all.'

The concept of the peace nexus has been utilised for a long time in humanitarian and development efforts. It is not about reallocat-

ing resources from one area to another—whether it's from humanitarian to peacebuilding or humanitarian to development and vice versa. It seeks to address the issue of peacebuilding through coherence, complementarity, and collaboration to address the root causes of conflict over the long term through different approaches.

Corita Corbijn, sector specialist in peacebuilding at ZOA, says currently within the INGOs and the donor sphere, there is more awareness of the need to include the Peace Nexus in programming in livelihood, food security, WASH and disaster response. In brief, a multisectoral approach.

'At ZOA,' she says, 'our definition of the nexus is based on how our relief work can contribute to peace and how recovery or development work can contribute to peace—we look at it from different multisectoral angles. The focus is on the peace element and how we approach it. We do not look at it as a single sector, but how other sectors can contribute to it and how they can address causes of violence and conflicts.'

A multisectoral approach offers many opportunities, which include meeting immediate needs while ensuring longer-term investment in addressing the systemic causes of conflict and vulnerability. It also has a better chance of reducing the impact of recurring conflicts and supporting peace, which is essential for development to be sustainable.

According to Corbijn, having a multisectoral approach is vital. Organisations can gain access and work in areas where they could not have been allowed if their focus were only on peacebuilding. It is further beneficial as it allows organisations to engage better with communities. ZOA, CARE Netherlands, and Oxfam Novib's participation in the *Addressing Root Causes of Armed Conflict and Irregular Migration* programme was proof of this.

Corita Corbijn

**'We bring the peace element, while others bring the livelihood or governance element. We must work in these kinds of cooperations and consortia'**







Marianne de Haan

**‘Freeing up a lot of money on defence and military spending should match funding for peacebuilding and strengthening civil forces’**

While each organisation had a different programme, components within their approaches towards peacebuilding were complementary. Corbijn believes a multisectoral approach can help organisations gain the trust and interest of communities. This approach also enables them to tackle the root causes of issues, such as land and water interventions.

Furthermore, it allows them to access areas the government may otherwise refuse access to peacebuilding organisations. Conflict is complex and highly localised. It is essential to understand its context and then incorporate peace pathways in development or humanitarian proposals, specifically through livelihood programmes, to foster stronger social cohesion.

Messina Manirakiza, programme officer at KPSRL, says there is a need for an interconnected and multidimensional approach to peacebuilding efforts within the development sector that will address the root causes of conflicts and promotes inclusive and holistic solutions. In addition to new emerging ones, existing conflicts defy already established responses to crises—this calls for breaking silos which limits the effectiveness of peacebuilding.

‘But walking the talk remains a challenge. It requires concrete reforms and adjustments in terms of funding and ways of working. This is done by adopting integrated funding approaches that break down silos between humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts or by involving multi-year funding commitments that span different phases of a crisis,’ Manirakiza says.

**Such flexible funding mechanisms can be used** to enable adaptive programming that can respond to changing circumstances and adjust interventions based on evolving needs and opportunities. Pooling resources from different sources, such as governments, donors, philanthropic organisations, and the private sector, can create a more comprehensive and coordinated response. As can fostering partnerships among governments, NGOs, international organisations, and the private sector.

According to Manirakiza, efforts to leverage diverse expertise, resources, and networks to address the root causes of crises and promote sustainable development should be collaborative. As significant as it is for a successful Peace Nexus, collaboration does not necessarily translate into an integration of roles by organisations. It can be conducted with each organisation respecting their roles, goals, and objectives.

‘While sectors need to work together,’ says Anne Judith Harrop, ‘there are a lot of challenges. Not that we should not do it, but it is not easy. Different organisations have their language; they are all starting from different places. There is quite a lot of work done in building up understanding and relationships to collaborate well with each other.’ Harrop is the global technical advisor at VSO.

Corbijn emphasises the importance of organisations working in cooperation, especially with both national and community-based organisations. ‘These cooperations are crucial,’ she says. ‘At ZOA, especially in areas where we work on peace, we work with national

organisations because they have far more knowledge and legitimacy. Together, we identify the roles they play best and how we can come in.

‘We bring the peace element, while others bring the livelihood or governance element. We must work in these kinds of cooperations and consortia. We need other organisations such as PAX that work on advocacy at higher levels, national and international, because we see the relevance and room for more cooperation.’

According to Harrop, many organisations lack the technical expertise to mainstream Peace Nexus programming: ‘Donors commission development programmes without recognising the importance of the humanitarian and peace lens in proposals, that makes it hard to bring in some of the nexus angles in programme designs as these components are unlikely to be funded.’

That is why it is significant to build on and address the glaring gaps and apply the *Do No Harm* principles. These are a leading tool for applying conflict sensitivity which recognises that aid—development, peacebuilding, or humanitarian assistance—can support either conflict or peace. When organisations use it in their programming, they become more effective, accountable, and efficient.

It supports effectiveness by encouraging organisations to tailor their interventions to the specific contexts in which they are implemented. The principle supports organisations’ accountability by requiring that they respond to any unintentional negative impacts created by their intervention and encourage local voices and priorities in programming.

**It reinforces efficiency by anticipating and preventing** unintended negative impacts, making plans easier to implement and more supported by local communities. Even amidst the opportunities, organisations recognise the challenge of keeping peacebuilding on the political agenda vis-à-vis issues such as aid and trade. The issue requires more authoritative voices and persuasive arguments to prove the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts.

‘There are some convincing arguments to make about keeping up funding for this type of work that goes beyond the moral appeals,’ De Haan says. ‘Freeing up a lot of money on defence and military spending should match funding for peacebuilding and strengthening civil forces.’

Organisations should define and commit to peacebuilding efforts, provide convincing arguments about their effectiveness, showcase their importance, and offer recommendations for improvement. Cohesive, complementary, and justifiable approaches, if put into practice within peacebuilding programmes, can address the root causes of conflict right up to attaining sustainable peace.

‘For cooperations to work,’ Manirakiza says, ‘organisations need to better redefine their visions and organisational culture regarding learning and partnerships. There is a need to break the silos and build trust with different partners and recognise the real value.’

‘Contexts,’ says Harrop, ‘shift between crises with opportunities for recovery and stability with risks and vulnerabilities. A good Peace Nexus programme requires a deep understanding of the context, recognising and responding to changes in that context and the drivers of those changes.’

Conducting the correct analysis, good mapping, knowing who else is working on what, and respecting or knowing the responsibilities of the local government are required for complementary approaches, which are vital in peacebuilding. Learning by testing and documenting best practices of Peace Nexus programming is crucial. These methods encompass the mapping and analysis of a programme’s interaction with a dynamic and constantly evolving environment, as well as other actors, activities, government service providers, and local actors in that environment.

The Triple Nexus refers to the interlinkages between humanitarian, development and peace action and actors. The nexus is an operational framework that entails complementary and coherence between emergency relief, development, and peacebuilding, as well as coordination between actors.

The Peace Nexus fosters greater coherence among actors working to strengthen resilience in fragile contexts and address the root causes of conflict.



Messina Laurette Manirakiza





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