

# Enhancing the Utility of Mediation in Peace-Building on a Multi Ethnic Continent

Nicholas Okai

Faculty of Academic Affairs and Research, Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, Ghana  
[nicholas.okai@kaiptc.org](mailto:nicholas.okai@kaiptc.org)

## Abstract

The beauty of African is deeply rooted in the numerous cultures that abound on the continent. These unique varieties of cultural expressions are intrinsically linked with the hundreds of ethnic groups that serve as the custodians of this treasured heritage. Ironically, the very differences that depict the variety in the cultural expressions, serve as triggers for ethnic mistrust and open conflicts. This paper highlights the importance of mediation in peace-building and recommends ways of enhancing its utility in a multi ethnic society such as Africa.

**Keywords:** Mediation, Peace-building, Multi-ethnic, Continent

## 1. Introduction

The need to maintain continuous peace in Africa has become a very important task that deserves all the needed attention and selfless contributions from all stakeholders. The very diverse nature of the continent, with its rich cultural complexity and variety, though unambiguously beautiful and enviable, bring in its trail hidden challenges, which have prevented the continent from reaping the immense benefits that such an array of natural wealth should bring to its people. Issues bordering on cultural differences, historical narratives, 'ethnicity' and others like marginalization and poor leadership have dangerously coupled over the years to produce very violent conflicts on the African continent. The conflict in Liberia, for example, was fueled by a combination of factors with the issue of ethnicity being at the core. A survey conducted by Peace-Building Data with support from the Harvard Human Initiative (HHI), on the cause of the conflict in that country identified greed and corruption as the highest contributing factor (63%) followed by identity and ethnic divisions (40%), poverty (30%), inequalities (27%), and land and food related issues (4%). Paradoxically, the causes of the conflict in Sierra Leone, which saw the maiming and displacements of thousands of innocent citizens, was also triggered by these same set of factors with ethnicity and corruption at the core.

Using the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Trefon (Trefon, 2005) highlights the impact of conflicts on African societies. Though surreal, because of the rural nature of large sections of the continent, people's livelihoods are directly linked with the environment (Trefon, 2005) and majority of Africans depend on basic natural resources such as fuel woods, game and plants (medicinal) for their basic daily survival. In rural Africa, all productive activities depend on when the rainy season begins, when it ends and what happens in-between. Conflicts seriously affect the time for fallowing, planting and harvesting in rural communities. Once the rains are missed and planting does not take place, families and whole communities can die of starvation, and the nature of land ownership is also such that when people become displaced as a result of conflicts, they cannot have access to land to cultivate any crop. This leads to cases of high malnutrition and diseases, which send many to their graves. Trefon highlights this phenomenon very well on the impact that the conflict in Dr. Congo had on the people living in Kivu and Katanga (Trefon, 2005). Under the influence of drugs, fighters openly commit very heinous crimes such as amputations, summary executions and open rape against such rural populations, leaving them traumatized for life.

As already highlighted and evidenced by the conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the discourse so far shows that, the very factors with the highest proclivity of starting conflicts constitute the ingredients that make up the rich African identity construct, which cannot be wiped or wished away. Peoples' identity encapsulated in their 'Yorubanness', 'Ashantiness' or 'Zuluness' becomes an intrinsic part of their very essence and cannot be compromised. DeVos provides a much earlier definition for this phenomenon (DeVos, 1975) and defines it as, "...a group's subjective symbolic or emblematic use of any aspect of culture, in order to differentiate themselves from other groups". Others like Smith later introduced (Smith, 1993) elements of common ancestry, shared memories, and the link to a historic territory to the definition. Unfortunately, this beautiful 'whole' in all its grandeur, encapsulating cherished elements like history, language, art, philosophy and religion among others, and collectively labeled as ethnic or 'ethnicity', have been scholarly reduced to mean the atavistic representation of 'African primordial barbarism' by some (Kaplan, 1993). Others like Collier liken it to a hovering spirit of group greed, seeking to control resources and to marginalize others in order to prevent them from benefitting from such resources. These perspectives, though farfetched, portray the kind of mental construct that most scholars have when it comes to the complex nature of the African narrative in the current milieu. Giving his take on this rather dicey issue, Jeng (Jeng, 2012) recommended that, some degree of caution should be taken in order not to generalize and create stereotypes when it comes to issues involving Africans, African

conflicts and matters of ethnicity. Granted that Jeng's caution is accepted in good faith, a cursory analysis of the various violent conflicts on the African continent somehow corroborate what Collier and Kaplan exude. Recent historical antecedents have shown that, intense competing socio-political claim-making among the numerous ethnic groups on the continent, which normally take place under various guises, have been the cause of several conflicts on the continent. This, in my view, calls for a comprehensive and conscious effort in ensuring that the negative impact of this reality is always reduced to the minimum. The social reality on the continent is such that, almost everything, from political parties to even churches, are structured along ethnic lines. This situation creates continuous group suspicions and severe tensions that easily trigger conflicts at any given time.

## **2. The Role of Mediation in Peace-building**

It is in the light of the above reality that the utility of mediation as a priceless tool in peace-building on the African continent becomes so pronounced. According to Nathan (Nathan, 2009), the art of mediation is a process of dialogue and negotiation in which a third party assists two or more disputant parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage or resolve a conflict without resort to force". Bercovitch defines it as "...a voluntary process aimed at bringing belligerent parties together through a third party with a view to ceasing hostilities through a means that will lead to an outcome agreeable by all the parties" (Bercovitch, 2006). The reason for mediation in any conflict scenario is to reduce the level of animosity and make room for an amicable settlement. The process of mediation itself brings several stakeholders with competing interests together under one roof, creating the necessary environment for either resolving the issues at stake amicably or for their exacerbation. This makes it very imperative for practical and prudent steps to be taken during any mediation enterprise. The mediation process should be able to weave together the different perspectives that will be brought on board by the different actors and their respective teams (Solomon, 2001), while at the same time being dynamic enough to contain sporadic and unanticipated demands and possible stalemates.

The shortage of professionally trained mediators on the continent to handle the ever-present challenges that the continent faces, is a real problem that needs addressing. Very few good opportunities exist for upgrading the skills of the few who are available (Nathan, 2009). Currently those labeled as high level mediators find it very easy to enter conflict situations, but professionally find it very difficult to secure long lasting solutions through the art of mediation. This ease in entry is only due to the fact that they have the needed clout because they were former presidents or occupied some high office. Aggressively addressing this issue of professional skill set deficits through a comprehensive and practical training programme is long overdue. Such an approach will help build a pool of competent professionals who will not only engage in conflict mediation, but will have the capacity to conduct conflict prevention research activities like scenario and meta data analysis for monitoring conflict triggers.

## **3. Addressing the Skill Set Deficit**

This paper focuses on the need to consolidate the utility of mediation as a peace-building tool on a multi-ethnic continent with its inescapable potential challenges. Any capacity building in this regard should include the following: How to conduct conflict analysis so that before entry, the mediator will be in a better position to know both the latent and patent factors behind the conflict situation. Conflict analysis enables the mediator to delve deeper into issues, noting possible triggers and being able to map out wise procedural strategies, taking into account very sensitive issues based on historical antecedents and social relations among others. In order words, the ability to conduct conflict analysis before entry makes the mediator's work easier and enhances the possibility of success.

Another skill set that mediators should be knowledgeable in is the process of negotiation. Every mediation process involves series of issues that must be negotiated upon. Conflict actors will have to make various concessions as they go through the process of mediation and the ability of the mediator to facilitate this will be very necessary. Strategies like how to state a position and make a claim based on an interest, while at the same time 'shifting ground' to make concessions are some of the skills that a mediator should have. The mediator's ability to professionally know what to do in a negotiation and how to manipulate the actors involved, so that they make concessions, is very important. The ability to communicate in such a way that will positively impact the mediation process is also something that any training package should address. In this area, skills on how to listen, how to speak and how to interpret body language will be very important for the mediator. In a multi-track mediation process, the presence of several actors (Mitchel, 1981) with different approaches, strategies and hidden interests, make the field of mediation a very 'political' space. How to function effectively in such an environment, while remaining focused and working within the given mandate could be a real challenge. How a mediator should professionally thread in such a setting should also be part of the skill set training. What to say, when to say it and what not to say at all, are some of the 'soft' things that a mediator should be imbued with.

The key elements of culture have very complex underpinnings which can fuel conflicts and also serve as barriers to any peace-building process. Naturally, different groups of people have well established traditions or ways of settling issues concerning conflicts. Interestingly, every group has the tendency to believe that their

methodology for resolving conflicts is the best and for that matter, any mediation strategy will have to follow their format. Such entrenched convictions can impact negatively or positively on the mediation process, but this depends on the mediator's knowledge or otherwise of such existing cultural perspectives and how that should be factored into the mediation design. This makes it very important for mediators to be trained to appreciate how cultural perspectives impact on peoples world view, behaviour and expectations.

Finally, despite the in-roads made after the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and the United Nations Resolution (UNSCR 2325), the patriarchal nature of the African continent has indirectly prevented the entry and active participation of women in the process of mediation. Apart from ensuring the inclusion of women in any future training strategy, they should also be engaged to play very key roles once they complete such trainings. Contemporary issues relating to gender should also form part of the training curriculum to help the mediators better appreciate the gender dimension of conflicts and how it negatively impact women. Women suffer severe untold hardships and brutalities during conflicts and should be seen as legitimate stakeholders when it comes to conflict prevention or peace-building activities.

At the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) level, a lot of practical steps have been taken to increase the utility of mediation as a peace-building tool. The regional body's architecture for peace is rooted in Article 33 (1) chapter VI of the UN Charter. The provisions under this article encourage countries to seek solution to conflicts and disagreements through mediation, negotiations, arbitration and other peace-building interventions (Afolabi, 2012). Articles 20 and 32 of the protocol relating to the mechanism for conflict prevention, management, resolution, peacekeeping and security of 1999 gives particular attention to mediation in addressing challenges in the sub-region. The introduction of multiparty (multi-track) mediation processes within the ECOWAS regional grouping has helped in addressing a lot of challenges. Citing the processes involved in addressing the crises in Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea and Niger, Afolabi highlights the extent of departure from the 'old order' when issues of hierarchy and overbearing postures were the main ingredients in finding amicable solutions to challenges within the Sub-region (Afolabi, 2012). The multi-track approach that was resorted to in solving these problems had tremendous positive impacts and clearly point to its importance for the de-escalation of conflicts and consolidation of peace in the sub-region. In a related development, the call for the establishment of a Mediation Facilitation Division (MFD) within the Political Affairs Division of the ECOWAS Commission, is therefore, quite long overdue. Already, the Preventive Diplomacy component (Afolabi, 2012) of the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) calls for the development of "a mediation facilitation capacity within the ECOWAS Commission to promote preventive diplomacy interventions in the region through competence and skills enhancement for mediators, information sharing and logistical support." In my view, such a specialized unit within the Commission will be a very good platform to support the practice of mediation in the sub-region.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show that, the very things that make the African continent unique and beautiful, be it imbued in the culture of the various ethnic groups or the mineral resources that abounds, serve as an endless supply of conflict triggers. Against this background, there is the need for urgent attention to be given to improving the skill set and knowledge base of actors mandated to venture into the process of mediation. Such an approach will lead to an increase in the rate of successful mediation on the continent, sparing citizens the untold hardships that are visited on them when conflicts occur.

#### References

- Afolabi B. T. (2012), 'Conceptual Shifts in Multi-Track Mediation in Sub-Saharan Africa', in U. Engel (ed), *New Mediation Practice in African Conflicts*, Leipzig: Leipzig Universitatsverlag, p.175.
- Bercovitch J. (2006), 'Mediation success or failure: a search for the elusive criteria', *Cardozo Journal of Conflict Resolution* 7(2): 290.
- Collier P. (2000), 'Doing Well out of War', in M. Berdal and D. Malone (eds.), *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agenda in Civil Wars*, Boulder:Lynne Rienner,pp.91-133.
- DeVos G. (1975), 'Ethnic Pluralism: Conflict and Accomodation' in G. DeVos and L. Romanucci-Ross (eds), *Ethnic Identity: Cultural Continuity and Change*, Chicago: University of Chucago Press, p16.
- Gentil A. (2005), 'Ethnicity and Citizenship in Sub-Saharan Africa', in P. Chabel, U. Engel and A. Gentili (eds), *Is Violence Inevitable in Africa? Theories in Conflict and Approaches to Conflict Prevention*, Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, p.35.
- Jeng A. (2012), 'Peace-building in the African Union', Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.61.
- Mitchell R. C. (1981), 'The Structure of International Conflicts,' New York: St. Martin's Press, p. 287.
- Nathan L. (2009), AU Commission, Seminar Report, *Towards Enhancing the Capacity of the AU in Mediation*, 16-15 October,p.13.

Peace-buildingdataOrganization, 'Liberia' <http://www.peacebuildingdata.org/liberia/results/civil-war/root-cause-civil> (accessed 20 March 2014).

Smith A. (1993), 'The Ethnic Source of Nationalism', *Survival*, 35:1 pp, 48-62.

Solomon, R (2001), 'Bringing Peace in Cambodia' in Croker, Hampson and Aall ( eds.), *Herding Cats*, Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, pp. 297-300.

Trefon T. (2005), 'The Social Cost of Conflict in Congo', in P. Chabel, U. Engel and A. Gentili (eds.), *Is Violence Inevitable in Africa? Theories in Conflict and Approaches to Conflict Prevention*, Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, p. 135.

The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open-Access hosting service and academic event management. The aim of the firm is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the firm can be found on the homepage:  
<http://www.iiste.org>

## CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

There are more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals hosted under the hosting platform.

**Prospective authors of journals can find the submission instruction on the following page:** <http://www.iiste.org/journals/> All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Paper version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

## MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: <http://www.iiste.org/book/>

Recent conferences: <http://www.iiste.org/conference/>

## IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

