



Grassroots - peace actors and traditional mechanisms in the management of farmer-herder conflicts in Tigania East, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The arid and semi-arid lands in Kenya (ASALs) continue to suffer farmer-herder conflicts as one of the most remarkable threats to peace, stability and development. Tigania East is one such example that is worsened by resource-rich areas, cultures, and politics, which promote conflict between groups. Whereas interventions by the government usually focus on providing security responses, the grassroots peace players have come out as important stakeholders in managing conflicts suitably. This paper examines the principles of managing the farmer-herder conflicts in Tigania East through the perspectives of the traditional mechanisms, community dialogue forums, and participatory conflict resolution models by implementing the involvement of the grassroots peace actors. Guided by Conflict Transformation Theory, the research provides insights into the ways in which local actors, whether by action or beliefs, use culturally entrenched practices to mediate, negotiate, reconcile, and transform relationships using the practices. The research adopted the descriptive research design. As this is a qualitative type of study, the target population includes elders, women's section organisations, youth leaders, religious leaders, and local administrators. The snowball sampling method and purposive method were accepted to give birth to 60 respondents to inform the findings. Data was collected using semi-structured questionnaires, oral interviews, focus group discussions and archival tools. Themes were utilised to study data. The findings also indicate that the grassroots peace-building is holistic because it focuses on solving immediate disagreements as well as structural inequalities by involving everyone in dialogue, creating awareness, community projects, and traditional reconciliation rituals. But issues like limited resources, political influence, low institutional support and socio-economic inequalities defy sustainability. The paper finds that grassroots strategies (when combined with formal institutional frameworks) are potentially potent in reshaping farmer-herder conflicts into spaces of peace-making, coexistence and developmental opportunities. The conclusion is that although the peace actors at the grassroots level are unquestionably essential, their efforts should be sustained by structural adjustments and collaboration on the multi-level basis to guarantee long-term stability. The paper recommends that there is a need for institutional support, encouragement of women and youth inclusion and mixed models of peace through judicious balance between grassroots legitimacy and state institutions.

Keywords: Farmer-Herder Conflict, Grassroots Peace Actors, Peace-Building, Traditional Mechanisms

I. INTRODUCTION

Farmer-herder conflict on the arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) of Africa has acquired greater prominence in this area where agriculture and pastoralism way of life intersect with the conditions of low resources, high population growth, and climatic instabilities. This type of conflict has been particularly common in Kenya in areas where migration farmer-herder tracts traverse settled farming groups with stand-offs as areas, grazing areas, and water sources (Mkutu, 2008; Schilling *et al.*, 2012). Such conflicts can be quite violent, displacing people and their property, disrupting the economies of local areas, and dispelling doubts in society. In addition to tangible financial losses, they destroy cohesion in society and destroy a future of sustainable development.

Tigania East is one of the most pronounced hotspots of conflicts in Kenya. In this case, farmers of the Meru group, who predominantly practise agriculture, have constant disputes with the Borana herders as they rely on livestock

keeping as a means of livelihood. This issue is further magnified by straddling ethnicities, administrative overlay emergencies, and political instigation that further converts resource-found issues over to an inter-religious struggle (Kramon & Posner, 2011). The perpetual cycles of hatred have been aggravated by historical grievances, poorly constructed institutional structures often leading to large-scale violence, which attracts large crowds of people.

The responses of the states to such conflicts have been rather ineffective, especially the ones that are conducted with the assistance of intense security measures and force application. Although the effect of such interventions can be a temporary rise in the number of cases of suppressed violence, they in most cases ignore the underlying causes of the tension, i.e., the human nature of livelihood insecurities, a sense of marginalization, and inter-ethnic mistrust (Okumu, 2017). This void identifies the necessity to employ other strategies that are culturally based, inclusive and sustainable.

In this environment, the role of grass-root peace actors, elder people, women leaders, religious institute leaders, and community-based organizations, in managing a conflict has been launched as leading in a conflict management context. They are valid because they are part of their cultural traditions, they are supported by moral authority, and they are therefore part of the societies that have been impacted. Compared to state actors, they use more dialogue-based, reconciliation-centred, and traditional justice-based strategies that seem to reach closer to the local populations. The older provide reference to traditional laws, the females employ both the sense power and the emotional power with the help of songs and movements, the religious leaders and the younger generations contribute to the reduction of distances and enhance the mutual trust.

This paper looks into the actions undertaken by grassroots players in the peace process in Tigania East especially including traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms, inclusive dialogue and multi-purpose peace-building. With its roots in the Conflict Transformation Theory (Lederach, 1997), the study acknowledges conflict as not only a problem that needs to be addressed according to its existing principles but also as the chance to change relationships, institutions, and facilitate coexistence. Through a comparative study of the grassroots actor-mediating, reconciling, and engaging community, the study aims at illustrating the importance of long-term stability in Tigania East that may be realized through grassroots actors.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The tensions between farmers and herders in Tigania East have continued decades after government interventions. Militarized operations have been the mainstay of state reactions, which although successful in alleviating violence in the short-term, do not target the underlying causes of violence, including resource competition, livelihood insecurity, and historical mistrust between Meru and the Borana communities. Through excessive use of coercive strategies, alternative mechanisms and community based programs that have preserved inter-ethnic harmony are relegated to the backburner. The literature reviewed up to now has had more than enough attention on structural and institutional aspects of conflict management. Security strategies related to farmer-herder conflicts are discussed by Mkutu (2008), climate variability and the lack of resources as inducers of conflicts are examined by Schilling *et al.* (2012). Okumu (2017) criticizes the lack of effectiveness of institutional peace-building activities, but those publications seldom discuss strategies of grassroot actors who are directly situated in the conflict arena. In even the few cases when traditional systems (such as the Njuri Ncheke of the Meru, the Borana Gada) have been captured, they are routinely regarded as relics of the past instead of adaptable means towards modern peace-building. In the same manner, the role of women, youth and religious leaders, who contribute to reconciliation through moral authority, activism and dialogue have not been well explored in the literature as well as in policy (Adan & Pkalya, 2005). This disconnect threatens to ignore activities by grass roots innovations that can provide more lasting solutions to peace than state minded interventions. This paper thus underscores the identification of the grassroots peace actors and the traditional processes involved in dealing with the farmer-herder conflicts in the Tigania East which further puts these under the greater perspective of Conflict Transformation Theory to shape their important role of bringing about sustainable co-existence.

1.2 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were to:

- i. Analyze the strategies employed by grassroots peace actors in managing farmer–herder conflicts in Tigania East.
- ii. Assess the extent to which traditional mechanisms and cultural practices are integrated into grassroots peace-building approaches.
- iii. Examine the challenges faced by grassroots peace actors in sustaining conflict management initiatives.
- iv. Explore the implications of grassroots strategies for long-term conflict transformation and sustainable peace.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Conflict Transformation Theory (CTT)

The paper has its basis on Conflict Transformation Theory (CTT) which focuses on resolving both immediate and structural levels of conflict. Through his argument, Lederach (1997) holds that conflict is not an issue to solve but an opportunity to transform relationships, attitudes and systems. CTT incorporates social justice, relationship building, and systemic change in peace building efforts unlike the conflict resolution methods that look at short-term settlements. The grassroots peace actors share the principles of CTT because they are able to work on the ground directly with communities, engage in dialogue, and implement culturally based mechanisms that appeal to the local settings (Miall, 2004). They acknowledge that permanent peace goes beyond just ceasefires; it involves reforming in perceptions of hostility, rebuilding trust and reforming imbalanced systems of sharing resources (Galtung, 1996).

Social theories along with the CTT system, communitarianism and another one which relates to indigenous knowledge systems are also applicable. Communitarian theory emphasizes belonging to a larger communal responsibility and cultural identity coupled with a local agency and thus to tackle the social issues (Etzioni, 1993). Based on the traditional approaches in conflict resolution, the legitimacy of local institutions, including the councils of elders is emphasized as valid intermediary (Boege, 2011). These systems build in line with African philosophy of Ubuntu-focused interdependence, mutual respect of each other, reconciliation (Murithi, 2006). A combination of these theoretical sources emphasizes on the ability of grassroots actors to settle not only short-term controversy but also long-term social structures and relations in a manner that will guarantee stability and mutual coexistence.

2.2 Empirical Review

Empirical evidence concerning farmer-herder conflict shows that these conflicts are high in sub-Saharan Africa especially in places where there is a shortage of resources and weather uncertainties. Banjaminsen and Ba (2009) argue that farmer-herder conflict is based on territory and resources related to grazing land and water, which is furred by undermining the traditional institutions in Mali. On the same note, Tonah (2006) records the involvement of farmer-herder conflicts in Ghana and observes that conflicts are made worse by the growing population density and agricultural activities.

As Okoli and Atelhe (2014) established in Nigeria, the spread of small arms, the erosive approach to traditional governance and the politicization of ethnicity enhanced the farmer-herder conflicts. On the other hand, grass-roots interventions have demonstrated possible power in violence alleviation which include the community peace committees and local mediation forums (Higazi, 2016).

In Kenya, a study suggests that such conflicts between herders and farmers are common in some parts of Kenya, including Turkana, West Pokot, Baringo, and Isiolo (Mkutu, 2008; Schilling et al., 2012). These researches owed the recurrence of the conflicts to environmental stress caused by climate, herders' movements and political intervention. Interestingly, the weakness of state machineries has in many instances been replaced by grassroots interventions, such as those of the Peace Committees, women and religious leaders (Odhiambo, 2012).

Particular to Tigania East Sub County, not much academic focus has been intense towards grassroots peace actors. Nevertheless, literature acknowledges the cultural legitimacy of the old institutions like *Njuri Ncheke* (Meru council of elders) and the Gada framework of Borana that has been able to mediate disputes in the past to promote social order (Nyukuri, 1997). These together with community-based institutions, would still be very instrumental in resolving the herders-farmer conflict. In general, the reality of being provided by empirical studies is that although the role of state-centered interventions still prevails, grassroots and traditional processes provide more culturally appealing and viable avenues to peace.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Approach

The research utilized descriptive research design to investigate the existence and the role of grassroots peace players coupled with incorporation of traditional systems in the management of the farmer-herder conflict within Tigania East. The method suited the study since it allowed the researcher to obtain lived experiences, perceptions, and practices of participants in peace-building considering cultural and social realities.

3.2 Sampling Strategy

The targeted population was the elders, women groups, youth leaders, religious leaders and local administrators representing the Meru and Borana communities. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were employed to come up with the knowledgeable and substances respondents in conflict management. The selection process ended with a sample

of 60 respondents whose duties are the community leaders and grass root actors who participate directly in the peace efforts.

3.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews/oral interview schedules, focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs), were used to gather data in Tigania East. Verbatim response of the participants was well recorded to avoid loss of meaning and authenticity. Triangulation was done using secondary literature and this increased reliability and authenticity of findings.

3.4 Data Analysis

The thematic analysis was used in analyzing the data collected. Narratives transcribed were coded and placed into different categories who included the traditional mechanisms, inter-ethnic cooperation and collaboration with the state authorities. These themes were then conceptualized in the context of Conflict Transformation Theory where meaningful inferences were being drawn.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted within the existing ethical research standards. The respondents were approached on a voluntary basis and informed on the objective of the study. All the participants were informed and their consent was garnered and the full exercise of the process was being done confidentially. The gathered data was applied with academic purposes in mind and all the time the dignity of the respondents was considered.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Role of Grassroots Peace Actors in Farmer–Herder Conflicts

The emergence of grassroots peace actors became the primary mediators of farmer-herder conflict in Tigania East, where the conflicts over the land territory, water and grazing rights often turn into bloody conflicts. The responses showed that the elders, women organizations, youth leaders, and religious leaders did not only interfere and attempt to stop the clashes but also assisted in rebuilding the trust and restoring social harmony. Their power was connected with the cultural credibility, approachability, and even with their being integrated into the routine of local life.

The most widely mentioned actors were the elders and they were said to have had the authority vested on them by custom and mutual trust in the community. They represented continuity of the community and their values so they played both role symbolically and practically. One of the respondents said:

When the elders are under the tree holding a conversation everybody hearkens. It is even upheld by the young warriors who respect their word since they are the voices of the community, (Oral interview with one of the elders in Muriri location, on 3rd March, 2025).

This was again strengthened by another elder at Ngambela, when he said:

Elders are the pillars of peace. Unless they speak the conflict will go on and on, (Oral interview with one of the elders of the Borana in Ngambela location, on 19th February, 2025).

These views echo the ideas of Lederach (1997) concerning the middle-range leadership approach in which actors rooted on the ground but disconnecting the quarreling sides with the formal institutions play the middle-range role.

In addition to elder powers, other ancient powers were the role of women groups as also identified in the study. Women were commonly called the mothers of peace because it was believed that it was in their capacity to appeal to moral conscience of communities and suppress men to retaliate with violence.

A leader of women said: When men get angry and vengeful we get them together and beg, telling them that children would be most affected should war be made, (Oral investigation of a female leader in women peace group in Muriri location on 27th March, 2025). This goes in line with the observation made by Agala (2010) that women in the farmer-herder African societies capitalized on their mobilizing capacity through caring and symbolic rites to foster conciliation and forgiveness.

Youth leaders too bridged through especially in mobilizing other young men who mostly take the frontline during violence. Young people tend to listen to their peers than the older generation as one of the youth participants articulated: We explain to them that vengeance kills our future and sometimes they buy in to these, (Oral Interview with a Youth leader in Ngambela location on 19th January, 2025). Their participation played an imperative role as they translate peace-statements into complying with, interlacing Mkutu (2008) results who found out the youth engagement decreased retaliation raids in Kenya, in the North. Religious leaders also fortified the peace processes by referring to spiritual authority and held interfaith dialogues messages, as well as initiated forgiveness. This fits accurately into the

argument of Mwagiru (2000) who claims that faith-based actors work to relieve tensions by providing moral legitimacy into peace processes.

Overall, these examples indicate that the agency of grass-root actors in addressing farmer-herder conflicts is a multi-layered approach of building peace built of indigenous authority, the role of women, youth mobilization and religious leadership. They were often more useful than state interventions due to their legitimacy and accessibility, thus their validation of the claims of Adan and Pkalya (2005) and Boege (2011) that locally-based mechanisms cannot be superseded in African peace-building situations.

4.2 Cultural Sensitivity in Conflict Resolution

The element of cultural sensitivity has turned out to be one of the effective blocks of grassroots peace-creating among the communities in Tigania East. It was found that peace players strategically integrated rituals, symbol and ceremonies during reconciliation processes considering that settlements had to transcend material compensation in favor of emotional and psychological injuries. These cultural practices gave a sense of legitimacy, by appeal to the shared traditions and the collective remembrance, helping to heal in the long run.

It is mentioned regularly by the respondents that the conflicts were not actually settled until the rituals were conducted. One of the old men of Borana ethnicity said:

When cattle invade a man's farm we never pay and go. A cleansing ritual is conducted in order not to leave bitterness in the hearts of people. Ethanol records, (Oral Interview with a member in the Borana community in Mula location, on 20th February, 2025).

A different respondent said: It happens when elders kill a goat and the meat is shared by both parties we realize that the conflict has lifted. It is no longer in our hearts, (Oral Interview with a farmer in Ngaremara location, on 22nd March, 2025).

This was reiterated by a youth leader who asserted that:

Whenever there are no rituals, people hold vile grudges. But when we do the cleansing we cause even the young people to forget about revenge, (Oral Interview with Youth leader in Ngambela location, on 26th March, 2025).

These verbatim responses explain how the cultural rituals were able to act as the expressive of pardon, covenants in spirit and in practice.

These findings are highly supported by secondary literature. According to Murithi (2006), the philosophy of African Ubuntu places greater emphasis on reconciliation by acknowledging common humanity and dignity, which is in line with the ritualistic approach of restoring the harmony. Similarly, Boege (2011) believes that indigenous methods of conflict management within African communities are locked into the communal identity by which would have ceremonies not only as rhetoric movements but social contracts. This culture-centered approach emphasizes the concept that rituals can engage forces to heal broken ties of trust into new relationships.

Adan and Pkalya (2005) also narrates that even in farmer-herder cases like in Northern Kenya, symbolic behaviors such as the milk sharing, slaughtering of animals, or blessing of elderly people was indispensable in terms of compliance with peace agreements. Such practices imposed ethical responsibility that overlaid transactional settlements, which put a reconciling in the culture of the society.

Therefore, the importance of cultural sensitivity in the context of peace-building could not be only a procedure but a revolution. Through rituals and symbols and similar activities, the grassroots actors made sure that the process of peace remained sustainable, socially legitimate and rooted in community realities. The combination of tradition and reconciliation points out that the culturally grounded methods are still invaluable in transforming conflicts in Africa especially where the interventions by the state are not only not legitimate or trustworthy.

4.3 Mediation and Reconciliation Strategies

The most striking paradigm of strategies are mediation and reconciliation, which were used by the actors at a grassroots level to control and reshape the farmer-herder conflict in Tigania East. In contrast to state-supported action that tended to focus on enforcement, grassroots strategies established non-exclusive ground upon which disputants were free to vent their grievances and pursue acceptable solutions. These processes were aimed at solving not only short-term controversy, but also mended rifted social relations.

The mediation forums frequently run by revered elders were always described as legitimate and effective by the respondents. One of the women peace committee leaders put it into perspective:

We reconcile the both. This is explained by the herders, then to the farmers and then led to an agreement by the elders. They also commonly concur on payment- cows or goats sometimes take the

place of damaged crops, (Oral Interview with a leader of a peace committee in Ngambela location, on 11th March, 2025).

Another senior member at the border pointed out: By listening to both parties, we are less angry. Peace can be achieved, but only when everybody will talk and listen, (Oral Interview with an elder in Mula location, on 12th March, 2025).

Another youth leader reflected on the same and he claimed:

Elders know how to calm down temper with right words. You see even young men will listen when some elders talk. We respect them because they can even place a curse on you if you are defiant and disrespectful (Oral Interview with a youth leader in Ngambela location, on 14th February, 2025).

Those stories promote mediation as a dialogue-based trust-building exercise that is grounded in fairness and fit as culture.

Findings are consistent with that of Miall (2004) who writes that mediation involves not just compromising but also changing the negative perceptions into constructive problem solving. The same studies by Pkalya *et al.*, (2004) report the prevalence of community mediation in Northern Kenya where livestock payments rather than fines (which take Christ to court) are typically agreed and upheld as compensation. Paffenholz (2010) also confirms that the success of the traditional mediation is that it does not punish those who violate but helps restore a relationship which is also found to be true in Tigania East sub-county experience.

Reconciliation activities transcended negotiation and compensation to heal emotional traumas. Starts, symbolic gestures, and shared feasts were identified as results that would be impossible to abandon in building trust by the respondents. One of the youth respondents noted:

When a consensus is arrived at, they make merry by slaughtering a goat and having a common meal. In that manner, people get a sense that they are a family once again, (Oral Interview with a youth leader in Ngaremarara, on 21st February, 2025).

It was further added by a women leader that when women sing after reconciliation, that is the end of the conflict indeed. The songs hail the settlement, (Oral Interview with one of the women leaders in Mula, on 17th February, 2025). This sort of symbolic action is reminiscent of the concept of positive peace discussed by Galtung (1996) in which reconciliation mends relationships and creates harmony. Rituals and shared meals, which turn enemies into relatives is also emphasized by Murithi (2006) as a way of making peace a social obligation. In such a way, mediation offered systematic negotiating and compensating mechanisms, whereas reconciliation reestablished feeling and communal relations. Cumulatively, these measures served to highlight the justification of grassroots peace actors where their ability to maintain long-term peace signifies a farmer/herder peace is strengthened.

4.4 Restorative Justice and Conflict Transformation

One of the most prominent discoveries of the research project was the fact that grassroots peace actors believed in restorative justice more than in punitive actions as a means of overcoming farmer-herder disputes. Communities engaged in the Tigania East lands used to focus on restoring dignity, repairing relationships, and to avoid future episodes of violence as opposed to state-based systems in which courts and punishments are involved. Not only did this solve the problem at hand within the period of time, it also changed the very substance that the communities in question were built with.

The respondents explained that restorative justice is a dialogue-based and forgiveness-driven process that involves compensation. One of the Borana elders emphasized the difference between the court system and traditional reconciliation mechanisms:

Courts repair, but elders rebuild relationships. When reconciliation is done, it is like sharing food after buying crops—you eat together, and there is no more revenge, (Oral Interview with one of the elders of Borana, in Ngambela on 13th March, 2025).

Most appropriately, one of the elders of the Ameru ethnic group observed:

When a cow destroys the harvest, it affects the whole family that depends on it. But the greatest thing is for individuals to accept each other, because if you only punish, it leaves behind hatred, (Oral Interview with one of the elders in Ngaremarara location, on 25th February, 2025).

One of the leaders of women put more stress on communal healing where she stated: we teach people that peace is not revenge. In case of reconciliation, even the female singers praise and encourage the reconciliation phenomenon,

to advance the community, (Oral Interview with a member of women peace group in Muriri, on 30th March, 2025). These perspectives explain why restorative justice manifests a settlement sound not only material, but also a relationship settlement, so that grudges should not accumulate.

These findings are corroborated with the secondary literature. Lederach (1997) points out that transforming conflict does need not only be a task undertaken in the short term-such as resettling disputes on a short time scale-but necessitates long term relational change, and that is what grassroots restorative justice practices provide. Legesse (2000) continues to state that African restorative justice systems are often interdependent between compensation and rituals, which strengthens the social bond of a community, preventing violence in the future. Likewise, Chitere and Ileri (2004) asserts that restorative processes heal the hurt by restoring harmony by repairing injury through dialogue and agreement, which is peaceful as opposed to punitive sanctions whereby divisions are likely to be intensified.

In the farmer-herders historical context of Kenya, Pkalya *et al.*, (2004) note that compensation in the form of livestock is significant in the context of restitution, as well as a moral commitment to maintain peace. This result is in line with the stories gathered, with respondents underlining the nature of the payment not only, but also the community rites following, like the ritual of cleansing oneself or having a common dinner. These practices reflect the notion of positive peace introduced by Galtung (1996) that seeks to resolve the structural problem, such as at the resource conflict, but also mistrusting or restoring the broken relations. Similar emphases in Murithi (2006) affirm that through communal reconciliation rituals typically through meals, blessings and symbolic rituals, collective belonging and collective responsibility are renewed.

Restorative Justice in the Tigania East is therefore more than just resolution of disputes. It provides culturally acceptable ways of how communities actually settle their grievances, recover dignity and rejuvenate trust among ethnic groups. In giving privilege to healing instead of punishment, the grassroots actors not only terminate hostilities but also provide the basis of sustainable and transformational peace.

4.5 Community Engagement and Collective Action

The other major observation of this research was that community involvement and shared responsibility played a major role in the management of farmer-herder conflicts through the influence of the grassroots peace actors. Compared with methods in which decisions are limited to a small number of leaders, peace processes in the Tigania East tended to engage the whole community resulting in higher inclusivity, legitimacy and adherence to results. This also gave the grassroots actors a sense of shared ownership in the peace-building outcomes and process by making the decision-making a participatory exercise.

Respondents also noted that conflict resolution was purposefully designed so as to represent a variety of voices. A farmer of Ameru community asserted:

In case of strife there can be no resolution on the part of the aged ones. The entire society gets summoned. Everyone comes to listen- a man, a lady, a young man, everyone, (Oral Interview with a farmer in Ngambela, on 23rd January, 2025).

Another respondent from the peace committee stated that peace initiatives cannot succeed without the active participation of community members, even though elders provide overall guidance. He emphasized that during meetings, everyone is given a chance to contribute; ensuring that no one later feels excluded or misrepresented, (Oral Interview with a peace committee member in Ngaremarara, on 17th February, 2025). One youth respondent also emphasized an inclusivity of these forums: we sit under trees or in a field. Everyone can speak. The entire day is sometimes necessary, though everyone ultimately comes to the conclusion with the same answer.

More so, the researcher discovered that, secondary data confirms this focus towards inclusiveness. The second point holds, according to Lederach (1997), that, sustainable peacebuilding must involve multi-level operations in that, the players at the grass-root are not passive recipients to top-down intervention but agents in their own process of peace. Similarly, Murithi (2006) reiterates that models of African conflict resolution flourish in communal dialogue, a communal agreement, and recovery of relationship as opposed to the adversarial or the elite-type processes. In the Kenyan background, Adan and Pkalya (2005) record how community *barazas* in the past offered integrated platforms of discussion whereby all socially binding decisions would be made. Odendaal (2013) goes further to suggest that extensive participation is also important in farmer-herder societies in order to stem out mistrust, and trade peace processes among the elites and therefore, to protect legitimacy.

In this outlook, community engagement did not only serve as a process, but as a revolutionary conflict containing mechanism. The inclusion and effective use of the involvement between women, marginalized groups, youth, and men enabled grassroots peace actors to enhance accountability and achieve collective pressure to keep agreements up to date. This wide involvement did not only boost legitimacy but also provided peace arrangements which were more resilient and strong basing on shared values and afterwards affiliating future visions towards co-existence. Overall, it is possible to note that collective action and inclusiveness were vital features of grassroots peacebuilding. Participatory

forums saw communities surpass boundaries and form binding decisions which had a moral dimension as well as a social dimension and could not have been very easy to defy or lack.

4.6 Role of Women in Peace-building

The results highlighted the need of women that has not been paid much attention to but is also very important in grassroots peace-building in Tigania East. Women led pivotal roles in the process of reconciliation, conflict prevention, and long-term peace-building despite the societal injustices that they face throughout history with a small role in the official leadership system. The mobilization using social networks and pledging forgiveness and curbing revenge cycles demanded women groups take the bold initiative, interfering at the most violent seeming times when violence was on the verge of breaking. They did not just play an informal role, but their efforts went further to the formal peace committees, inter-community forums and cross-border movements.

Some of the respondents pointed out how women had a moral authority when looked upon as caretakers and guardians of community welfare. A leader of a women peace group pointed it out: When we women find men going out to war, they are the mothers who weep and lead them to their senses. We explain to them, but this will ruin the future of our children. Another respondent explained further,

...when there is a conflict, women on either side adopt each other. We sit and remind our husbands and sons they can only add to hunger and bring more suffering by fighting. (Oral interview with a community peace member in Muriri, on 20th February, 2025).

A young lady also mentioned that this is so:

...we may not sit in company with elders and determine, but we sing songs of peace in assemblies and listens. In that manner, we are able to be heard when we are not at the table, (Oral Interview with a young woman in Ngaremara, on 19th February, 2025).

These stories reveal how females used their charms, visits, songs, and morals in such ways that were subtle and yet potent to avoid violence and repair fractures.

Secondary sources further supported the report of these oral findings. As an illustration, Tonah (2006) focus on the centrality of African women in the realm of grassroots activities, where women tend to be the performing ground of reconciliation processes due to cross-ethnicities and network mobilizing. Paffenholz (2010) also emphasizes the importance of women actively pursuing peace using the role of women within their family and in community situations where they are denied political power. These views are echoed with the Tigania East setting, where women are portrayed repeatedly as being the mothers of peace as having the moral authority to stop violence of any kind.

Furthermore, profitability of females illustrates the aspect of inclusivity by Ledach (1997) effectively targeting to promote voices of every community especially those dominated in history. Agala (2010) also contributes that the African activities involving women empower intergenerational strength by instilling values of peace in families and by making sure that reconciliation is not another activity that lapses in the periodic forum and splash in day-to-day life.

In this way, women turned out to be the necessary peace-builders as they did not complement anymore but rather translate classical conflict resolution mechanisms. They did so at a cost to moral weight, enhanced inclusivity, a shift of conflict dynamics as they employed caring, community welfare, and kinship in the very essence of peace-building activities.

4.7 Monitoring and Evaluation of Peace Initiatives

The results showed that grassroots peace actors, on the one hand, relied on informal, though constructive methods of knowledge collection and assessment of peace processes. The local communities counted on organization culture-based structures of control or institutions of trust, dialogue and accountability, unlike formal institutional structures where bureaucratic measures and recidivistic reporting were mostly used. Elders, women and youth leaders worked hand in hand in enforcing adherence to an agreement like checking whether a compensation was made or the rules on grazing zones was followed. These mechanisms focused on accountability, but this was accomplished not by coercion but by community conversations and confirming morality. Some respondents highlighted the flexibility of these traditional systems. One of them explained;

Once peace is restored, Borana elders follow up to ensure that cattle are grazing in the agreed areas. If the agreement is violated, the community is summoned again to discuss the matter, (Oral Interview with an Elder from Borana community in Mula, on 8th March, 2025).

According to another participant, the study was informed that;

...we do not wait until the police arrive. Both our youths and women groups report to elders since they are aware of what is going on. In that manner, the issues are resolved at an early stage, (Oral Interview with a member of Meru women group in Ngaremara, on 5th March, 2025).

Equally, a youth leader described to the study that; we are like the eyes of the society. When there is a person who violates the discussion it is taken back to elders and all the people are summoned to justify, (Oral Interview with a youth leader in Mula, on 5th February, 2025).

These accounts disclose the notion of consistent checking during which violations were not mainly penalized but renegotiated by dialogue; hence, ensuring flexibility and responsibility simultaneously.

It also turned out to the study that, secondary literature supports such findings. Paffenholz (2010) suggests that community-led monitoring is essential to the maintenance of a local peace agreement particularly in a weak setting when there are no or little credibility with the state institutions. Odendaal (2013) further notes that informal monitoring systems incorporated within the social structures offer both legitimacy and responsiveness whereby interventions undertaken are quick before conflicts rise. In a research work on farmer-herder societies that was done by Mkutu (2008) in East Africa, youth also played the role of watchdogs to agreements and made sure that there was adherence to the agreements on sharing of resources. These are complemented by these insights which go further to support field narratives to assert that local monitoring mechanisms, though they need not be formal, are haptic and contextual.

Up to certain extent, limitations were however noticeable. Although such informal systems increased ownership and legitimacy locally, they did not always have formal documentation and reports and it was therefore hard to quantify long term influence or report long term results to an NGO, a donor or a government agency. In its difficulties this may resonate with the warning by Lederach (1997) that, though perfectly suited to relational mending after violence, and to its professional growth check the recurrence of violence on a personal scale, grassroots peace-building tends to have an ineffective interface with other formal structures. Consequently, grassroots peace-building through monitoring and evaluation was a combination of cultural legitimacy, inclusivity and adaptability. Though most effective at the community level, such systems needed to be complemented with formal structures to be sustainable, externally recognized and scalable.

4.8 Traditional Mechanisms and Inter-Ethnic Cooperation

This work has discovered that traditional justice systems like Njuri Ncheke of the Meru, and the Gada system of Borana played a crucial role in correcting disputes in Tigania East. These bodies were endowed with symbolic power, historical credibility and cultural value, which meant that they were very revered avenues of reconciliation, and inter-ethnic collaboration. In comparison to the formal state structures, which were seen as remote or prejudiced, the traditional ones were considered to be close, reliable, and based on the commonly shared values.

The respondents emphasized the long-term importance of councils of elders in bridging communities. As one interviewee explained:

Every time we hold a meeting between the Meru elders and the Borana elders, we are assured of peace. There is a sense of brotherhood between them rather than enmity. Indeed, this strengthens the entire society, (Oral Interview with a Borana Farmer-herder in Muriri, on 4th March, 2025).

Another respondent echoed this view, noting that the Njuri Ncheke elders are able to sit with Borana leaders and reach an understanding on boundary or livestock-related disputes. Once such discussions take place, the entire community respects and abides by the outcome. In the same way, one of the women respondents pointed to their most symbolic contribution:

In case the elders shake hands, it feels as though we are all shaking hands. We follow their word, (Oral Interview with a women group member in Ngaremara, on 17th January, 2025).

Such verbatims allow revealing the fact that the power of traditional institutions was not confined to formal agreements but reflected the collective identity and trust.

These findings are backed up by scholars such as Boege (2011), who asserted that, these institutions are termed as embodiments of hybrid type of peace-building as the traditional form of governance interacts with the contemporary frameworks as a means of bolstering legitimacy. As Chitere and Ireri (2004) point out, the Njuri Ncheke council has continued to play an indispensable role that has been evident in Meru especially in settling land disputes and ensuring peace within the community. Similarly, the Gada system, another centuries-old democratic and rotational institution of

government of the Borana, has long influenced resource utilization, instituted norms and regulated relations between groups (Legesse, 2000). These systems display cultural resilience as well as flexibility when it comes to dealing with the modern conflicts.

The effectiveness of the traditional mechanisms is also attested by comparative studies. Adan and Pkalya (2005) report the effective creation of grazing zones and compensation systems with the help of joint councils of elders in northern Kenya thus preventing violence. The same researcher, Mkutu (2008), notes that conventional mechanisms tend to be more effective than the role played by state-sponsored interventions mainly because they are developed with sense of community responsibility and are acceptable across ethnic boundaries.

In this way, traditional institutions became vital instruments of inter-ethnic collaboration, and cannot just solve the divide but also establish peace processes with some basis on cultural legitimacy. It is sorrowful how they managed to integrate both the ancient practices and the modernization of peace, which indicates their capacity and lifelong otherwise. Through recourse to these institutions, the actors on the grassroots level managed to make peace-building a situation-specific one that could be universally respected and owned by the people.

4.9 Collaboration with State Authorities

Despite the established effectiveness of grassroots actors in the areas of farmer-herder conflicts resolution, the results showed that the cooperation with the state authorities continued to play a critical role in peace-building in Tigania East. Women along with other groups especially the elders and youthful leaders often approached the chiefs, the police and their local administrators to escalate the issue to a higher level which they could not govern. These types of collaborations were both required to carry out enforcement, and respond to cases spanning both community/county boundaries.

Counterarguments against the advantages of work with formal institutions were offset by the advantages exemplified by respondents. It happens because at times the seniors speak, yet young men do not pay attention, as one youth described it: At that time, chiefs or police are summoned to the rescue, (Oral Interview with a youth in Mula, on 6th April, 2025). Another elderly man in the neighborhood explained further:

Cattle that are stolen and moved to far away locations can only be tracked down by the police and this is across the subcounties. We cannot manage alone, (Oral Interview with an elder of Borana community in Ngambela, on 9th February, 2025).

One woman respondent also suggested: We need government on our side, but when they hang around or take bribes people lose hope, (Oral Interview with a women group member in Mula, on 10th March, 2025). These accounts reinstate the compatible relationship though at times antagonistic between grassroots processes and state institutions.

It also turned out to the researcher that secondary literature contains confirmation of this dynamic. For example, Odhiambo (2012) asserts that the effectiveness of indigenous peace-building processes can be more effective with the implementation of state authorities since the partnership will certainly increase their legitimacy and enforcement abilities. On the same note, Pkalya *et al.*, (2004) record that communities in the north of Kenya through counseling by the elders usually involve the administrative officers and police to bring about compliance especially when it is a cross-border cattle raid or incessant grueling contracts. This mixed kind of interaction is echoed in the definition by Boege (2011) of a layered peace architecture that Boege uses to describe the cooperation of actors on the local, state, and non-state levels in order to preserve peace.

However, the distrust of the state institutions was very vocal. Associated with reduction of trust, banshees mentioned frequently corruption, bureaucracy and a cultural insensitivity. This is a similar concern with Mkutu (2008), who found that the intervention of the state is usually seen as foreign and insensitive to local realities by farmer-herder communities. Specifically, societies have blamed security services to at times creating violence instead of de-escalating it as in cases where acts of excessive force were employed. To summarise, the results highlight the importance of the collaborative models, integrating the legitimacy of grassroots institutions with the authority and resources of the state, in a systemic approach to sustainable peace in farmer-herder settings. This kind of combination would assure that there is a culture resonance and structural enforcement hence making violent conflict less frequent and community faith in peace processes stronger.

4.10 Challenges Facing Grassroots Peace Actors

Irrespective of their exceptional roles in promoting peace, the peace actors at the grassroots had major hazards that affected the effectiveness of their efforts. One of the reasons was resource shortage, which was an obstacle that came in and out of the narratives. Communities did not have the support of dialogue platforms and peace forums because they were unable to support them without regular external or institutional reinforcement. As one woman chief argued:

We want to sit together more, to have a talk, but we have no encouragement. At times we resort to giving even out of our pocket

to travel or purchase food, (Oral Interview with a member of peace committee in Ngambela, on 26th January, 2025).

This limitation of resources restricted the frequency and inclusiveness of meetings, making them unlikely to be able to react as rapidly as possible to emerging conflicts.

Another barrier that continually existed was political interference. Some respondents said that there were instances politicians played with ethnic divide to secure re-election in office at the expense of tensions. One of the elders pointed out:

Politicians divide us, by their words. When the elections are over, they put us to the battle individually, (Oral Interview with one Meru elder in Muriri, on 7th April, 2025).

Similar politicization of ethnicity already enjoys a rich history within farmer-herder areas in Kenya whereby the location of electoral competition increases communal mistrust and violence (Nyukuri, 1997).

Furthermore, it was reported to the researcher that communities recruited young, unemployed and marginalized men in violent groups too easily, undermining the authority of elders and causing further rounds of retaliation. This observation is correlated with Mkutu (2008), who highlights small weapon proliferation and traditional institutions disempowerment as two factors in promoting insecurity in the North of Kenya.

These are structural and contextual phenomenon triangulated by secondary source confirms taste of this challenge. The dearth of resources is indicative of larger problems of underdevelopment and disenfranchisement of farmer-herder territory (Pkalya *et al.*, 2004) and the weakness of state-society bonds is discernible in political interference. All these limitations points to a necessity to formulate the policies of grassroots involvement in a wider issue of governance reform, youth empowerment, and sustainable development in order to make the most radical type of community-based peace-building demandable in the long term.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The research found that at the conflict between farmers and herders in Tigania East, central role in resolving the conflict lies with grassroots peace actors. It was found that elders, women groups, youth and religious leaders persuade by using culturally internalized forms of mediation and reconciliation coupled with belief in the values of the community. They calmed down the tensions and encouraged peaceful co-existence by the use of dialogue, restorative justice, and consensus building. The fieldwork storytelling interviews emphasized the legitimacy of the local and moral authority of the local grass roots actors in the community acting to restore relationships more effectively than a formal state system would act. As an example; when elders would take *barazas*, the elders' power was seldom challenged and their words could persuade the disputants on the path of reconciliation. This is why the results reiterate an argument by Lederach that claims that sustainable peace can be achieved through community-based change and not through enforcement by top leadership. Yet overcoming obstacles like political influence, lack of resources, and repeated cycles of violence also came into focus highlighting the falsity of peace in farmer-herder- farming environments. The conclusion is that although the peace actors at the grassroots level are unquestionably essential, their efforts should be sustained by structural adjustments and collaboration on the multi-level basis to guarantee long-term stability.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on these findings, the study recommends that since the grassroots peace structures have proven to be very strong, they need to be given the necessary logistical and material support to improve their mediation and monitoring effectiveness. The peace-making activities demonstrated to be very effective when executed by women needed to be strategically incorporated in formal and communal peace building efforts through leadership training and involvement in the decision making processes. Besides, institutionalizing inter-ethnic communication between elders of Meru and Boranas with the assistance of the legitimacy of the traditional institutions, including the *Njuri Ncheke* and Gada systems, would contribute to the development of trust coinciding with a lesser gear of reciprocity. It has also been advisable to adopt a hybrid system as the old institution works hand in hand with the state systems like the chiefs, the police, and county systems to enforce peace deals and compliance. In order to combat root causes of conflict, structural issues that have been found to contribute to the cause of conflicts like land and water scarcity, unemployment and political manipulation by the elites should be addressed through interventions as such however, the interventions must always target these root causes of conflict. Lastly, conscious precautions must be taken to de-politicize peace-building activities so that political motives do not compromise on the communal activities. Grassroots peace-building success is determined by effective cultural legitimacy, as well as the way it integrates with other larger socio-political change that fosters justice, equity and long-term development.



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