

Mechanisms for mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts in the Kubasali Escarpment in Kakamega and Nandi counties, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Inter-ethnic conflicts can undermine social cohesion, livelihoods and socioeconomic development, particularly where disputes over land, boundaries and shared resources remain unresolved. In Kubasali Escarpment, Kakamega and Nandi counties, tensions between the Luhya and Nandi communities have been associated with land ownership and boundary disputes, livestock grazing, crop destruction and access to shared resources. This study interrogated mechanisms mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts in Kubasali Escarpment, guided by Conflict Transformation Theory and Intergroup Contact Theory. Conflict Transformation Theory provided a framework for examining how dispute-resolution processes address grievances, relationships and institutional interactions, while Intergroup Contact Theory informed the examination of how cooperation, shared activities and interaction between the two communities may support peaceful coexistence. The study adopted an interpretivist philosophical approach and a mixed-methods design incorporating descriptive and historical research. The target population comprised 620 participants, including 384 household heads and 236 other participants drawn from relevant stakeholder groups. Data were collected using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observation checklists and documentary sources. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings showed that mediation was the most frequently reported dispute-resolution mechanism (56.0%), followed by negotiation (37.0%), litigation (4.9%) and arbitration (2.1%). Other reported approaches included public participation in decision-making (48.2%), formation of social groups (29.9%), improvement of social amenities (15.6%) and intermarriage (6.3%). Religious leaders were the most frequently identified stakeholders involved in conflict management (33.1%), followed by non-governmental organisations (25.0%), government authorities (21.1%), Nyumba Kumi (13.0%) and councils of elders (7.8%). Qualitative findings highlighted the importance of mediator neutrality, inclusive participation and intercommunity cooperation, while identifying mistrust, perceived ethnic favouritism, limited institutional capacity and weak coordination as constraints. The findings are consistent with the theoretical emphasis on constructive relationship-building and intergroup cooperation, although the reported frequencies do not independently establish the effectiveness of individual mechanisms. The study recommends strengthening mediation and negotiation, promoting inclusive community participation, supporting cross-community initiatives, building institutional capacity and improving coordination among stakeholders to support sustainable peaceful coexistence.

Keywords: Inter-ethnic conflict, conflict mitigation, mediation, negotiation, community participation, peacebuilding, Kubasali Escarpment, Kenya

I. INTRODUCTION

Inter-ethnic conflicts remain a significant obstacle to peace, security and socioeconomic development in plural societies. Such conflicts may arise from competition over land and natural resources, political interests, historical grievances and antagonistic ethnic identities (Schafer, 2002). When disputes are inadequately managed, they can damage social relationships, disrupt livelihoods, destroy property and displace communities. Sustainable peacebuilding therefore requires mechanisms that address disputes constructively and respond to the needs of affected communities (Lederach, 1997; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2008).

Across Africa, intercommunal conflicts have frequently been associated with contested land, resource competition, historical grievances and weaknesses in governance. In Kenya, land-based conflicts in the Mount Elgon region illustrate how competing claims over resources and historical grievances can contribute to violence and insecurity (Simiyu, 2008). These experiences highlight the importance of examining conflict-mitigation mechanisms within their

specific social, political and institutional contexts rather than assuming that approaches used elsewhere will produce similar outcomes.

In western Kenya, inter-ethnic relations between the Luhya community in Kakamega County and the Nandi community in Nandi County have been affected by recurring disputes around Kubasali Escarpment. Tensions have been associated with competing claims over land ownership and boundaries, livestock grazing, crop destruction and access to shared resources. Such disputes can intensify mistrust and complicate efforts to sustain peaceful relations. Local security reports cited in the study identify resource competition and recurring tensions as concerns in the area (Kakamega County Security Reports, 2018, 2021, 2022).

Several mechanisms may contribute to mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts, including negotiation, mediation, arbitration, litigation, security interventions, and community dialogue and peace committees. Traditional leaders, councils of elders, religious institutions, government administrators and civil society organisations may also support dispute resolution and reconciliation. Intergroup Contact Theory suggests that constructive interaction between members of different groups can reduce prejudice when supported by favourable conditions, including cooperation and shared goals (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Conflict Transformation Theory similarly emphasises addressing underlying grievances, strengthening relationships and promoting inclusive processes for sustainable peace (Galtung, 1996; Lederach, 1997). These perspectives provide a basis for examining the roles of formal institutions and community-based initiatives in managing disputes in Kubasali Escarpment.

However, the existence of conflict-mitigation initiatives does not necessarily establish how they operate, how affected communities perceive them or how they contribute to peaceful coexistence. Their application may be influenced by community participation, stakeholder coordination, the handling of land and resource grievances, and the implementation of agreements. Evidence from other regions provides useful comparative insights but cannot establish which mechanisms are most relevant to the Luhya and Nandi communities in the study area. This study therefore interrogated mechanisms mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts in Kubasali Escarpment in Kakamega and Nandi counties.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Inter-ethnic conflicts between the Luhya and Nandi communities around Kubasali Escarpment in Kakamega and Nandi counties have been associated with disputes over land ownership and boundaries, grazing, crop destruction and access to natural resources. Competition over land and resources has also contributed to conflict in other parts of Kenya, including Mount Elgon (Simiyu, 2008). Such tensions threaten community safety, disrupt livelihoods and undermine peaceful relations. Although conflict resolution and peacebuilding approaches can support reconciliation and sustainable peace (Lederach, 1997; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2008), questions remain about how the mechanisms employed in Kubasali Escarpment operate and contribute to managing recurring disputes.

The central problem is the limited context-specific understanding of the mechanisms used to mitigate inter-ethnic conflicts in Kubasali Escarpment, including the roles of relevant stakeholders and the limitations encountered in applying these approaches. Without examining these mechanisms in their local context, it is difficult to identify evidence-based ways of strengthening conflict management and sustainable peacebuilding. The study therefore interrogated mechanisms mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts in Kubasali Escarpment in Kakamega and Nandi counties.

1.2 Research Objective

To interrogate mechanisms mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts in Kubasali escarpment in Kakamega and Nandi counties.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Conflict Transformation Theory

Conflict Transformation Theory, associated particularly with Lederach (1997) and informed by Galtung (1996) work on peace and structural violence, conceptualises conflict as a process embedded in relationships, institutions and wider social structures. Rather than concentrating solely on ending immediate hostilities, the theory emphasises transforming relationships, addressing underlying grievances, strengthening institutions and promoting inclusive processes that support sustainable peace. Kriesberg (1998) similarly highlights the potential for constructive approaches to reduce conflict escalation and create more durable outcomes.

The theory provides the principal analytical framework for interrogating mechanisms used to mitigate inter-ethnic conflicts between the Luhya and Nandi communities in Kubasali Escarpment. It directs attention to how mechanisms such as mediation, negotiation, security interventions, councils of elders, peace committees and government-led initiatives respond to grievances concerning land, boundaries and resource access. It also supports examination of stakeholder participation, institutional coordination and the extent to which interventions address conditions associated with recurring conflict. The theory is particularly relevant because the presence of peace initiatives

does not necessarily demonstrate that underlying tensions have been resolved. Its application therefore enables the study to examine the mechanisms employed, their perceived contributions and the limitations affecting sustainable peace.

2.1.2 Intergroup Contact Theory

Intergroup Contact Theory, developed by Allport (1954), proposes that interaction between members of different social groups can reduce prejudice and hostility when contact occurs under favourable conditions, including equal status, shared goals, cooperation and institutional support. Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis found that intergroup contact generally reduces prejudice, although outcomes vary according to the nature and context of the interaction.

The theory complements Conflict Transformation Theory by explaining how relationships between the Luhya and Nandi communities may be improved through constructive interaction. Intercommunity dialogue, joint development activities, shared economic initiatives and cooperation among community leaders may create opportunities to build trust and reduce ethnic stereotypes. However, contact alone may be insufficient where interactions are characterised by unequal power, competition over land or unresolved historical grievances. The theory therefore helps assess the potential contribution of community-based mechanisms to improved intergroup relations, while Conflict Transformation Theory provides the broader framework for examining institutional responses and underlying conflict conditions.

2.2 Empirical Review

Empirical literature identifies public sensitisation, security interventions, peace committees, negotiation, mediation, formal judicial processes, traditional justice systems, equitable resource distribution, public participation and community-based peacebuilding as mechanisms for mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts. Aluvi (2013) reported that public barazas in Kuria encouraged the voluntary surrender of 42 firearms and 106 rounds of ammunition between 2009 and 2011. The establishment of Administration Police posts, enhanced patrols and district peace committees also contributed to local security and conflict management. However, security interventions may provide only temporary relief when they fail to address underlying grievances, while inadequate personnel and resources can constrain timely responses to violence.

Peace agreements and formal institutions are important but may be ineffective when they exclude affected communities or neglect local grievances. The UNDP (2008) emphasises coordination between state and non-state actors in post-conflict recovery, while Lederach (1997) highlights the importance of inclusive, locally grounded peacebuilding. Formal judicial processes can provide legal remedies, but their cost, accessibility and responsiveness to customary practices may limit their suitability for some community disputes. Traditional justice systems, councils of elders and African customary law can offer locally accepted approaches to negotiation and reconciliation, provided that they operate fairly and respect applicable legal and human-rights standards.

Community participation and cooperation can strengthen conflict mitigation by promoting inclusive decision-making, shared responsibility and local ownership of peacebuilding initiatives. Lederach (1997) emphasises the importance of involving multiple stakeholders and building locally grounded structures for sustainable peace. Similarly, the UNDP (2008) highlights the importance of strengthening local capacities and institutions in post-conflict recovery. Social groups, including women's and youth groups, self-help organisations and faith-based networks, may provide opportunities for cooperation across community divisions. Equitable access to land, water, employment and public services is also important because perceived inequalities in resource allocation can sustain grievances and contribute to recurring disputes.

The literature further suggests that sustainable peace requires more than the suppression of immediate violence. Galtung (1996) distinguishes between negative peace, characterised by the absence of direct violence, and positive peace, which also requires addressing structural conditions that perpetuate insecurity and inequality. Consequently, effective conflict mitigation should combine timely security responses with dialogue, inclusive decision-making, impartial dispute resolution and fair resource allocation. However, evidence from other Kenyan communities cannot automatically establish the effectiveness of these approaches in Kubasali Escarpment. This study therefore examines the mechanisms employed to mitigate inter-ethnic conflicts between the Luhya and Nandi communities in Kakamega and Nandi counties, focusing on their application, the roles of relevant stakeholders and their contribution to sustainable peace.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted descriptive and historical research designs to interrogate mechanisms mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts in Kubasali Escarpment. The descriptive design facilitated examination of existing conflict-mitigation practices and stakeholder experiences, while the historical design provided a basis for examining interventions and recurring

conflicts from 1992 to the time of data collection (Orodho, 2002). A mixed-methods approach integrated quantitative and qualitative evidence.

3.2 Study Area and Population

The study was conducted in Kakamega North and Kakamega East sub-counties in Kakamega County, and Nandi North and Chesumei sub-counties in Nandi County, Kenya as shown on the map below. These areas were selected because of their relevance to inter-ethnic tensions between the Luhya and Nandi communities. The target population comprised household heads and key stakeholders involved in conflict management, including local administrators, security officers, elected leaders, elders, religious leaders, civil society representatives, and victims and perpetrators of inter-ethnic conflicts.

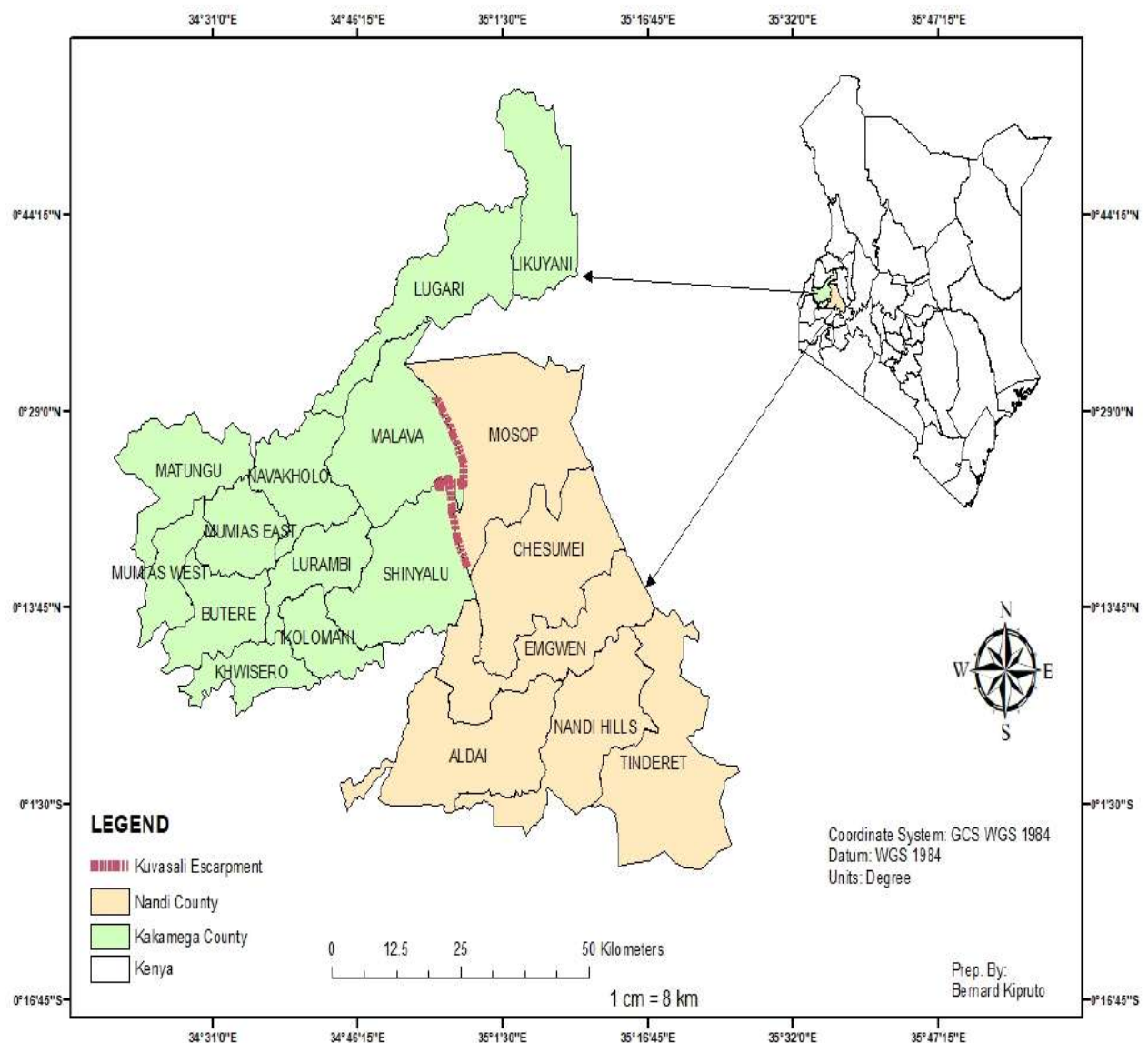


Figure 1
Map of the Study Area

3.3 Sampling and Sample Size

The study involved 620 participants: 384 household heads, 154 key informants and 82 focus group discussion participants. Fisher's sample-size formula, as cited in Mugenda and Mugenda (1999), was used to determine the household sample. Simple random sampling was used to select household heads, while purposive, systematic random and snowball sampling were applied to relevant stakeholder groups. Census sampling was used for selected categories where all members of the identified group were included.

3.4 Data Collection

Primary data were collected using questionnaires administered to household heads, semi-structured interviews with key informants, focus group discussions with elders, religious leaders and civil society representatives, and observation checklists. These methods elicited information on the mitigation mechanisms employed, stakeholder participation, experiences with dispute resolution and perceived limitations. Secondary data were obtained from relevant historical records, reports and other documentary sources to contextualise conflict-management initiatives in the study area.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded and analysed using SPSS and Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to summarise responses concerning conflict-mitigation mechanisms. Qualitative data from interviews, focus group discussions, observations and documentary sources were analysed thematically. Findings from the different sources were compared to identify recurring themes concerning the mechanisms employed, stakeholder roles and challenges affecting their application.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Reported Mechanisms for Mitigating Inter-Ethnic Conflicts

The study examined mechanisms used to manage inter-ethnic conflicts between the Luhya and Nandi communities in Kubasali Escarpment, Kakamega and Nandi counties. The findings are presented in three areas: formal and informal dispute-resolution mechanisms, community-based approaches, and stakeholder involvement.

4.1.1 Dispute-Resolution Mechanisms

Figure 2 indicates that mediation 215 (56%) was the highest in ranking by the respondents in Kakamega and Nandi Counties. Negotiation was second 142 (37%), followed by litigation at 19 (5%) and arbitration 8 (2%) as the lowest in ranking in regard to the strategies mostly used to reduce the inter-ethnic conflicts in Kakamega and Nandi Counties. The findings suggest that the respondents view mediation and negotiation as the most used mechanisms of solving many conflicts that affect them, while a minority argued that litigation and arbitration are less used in conflict resolution.

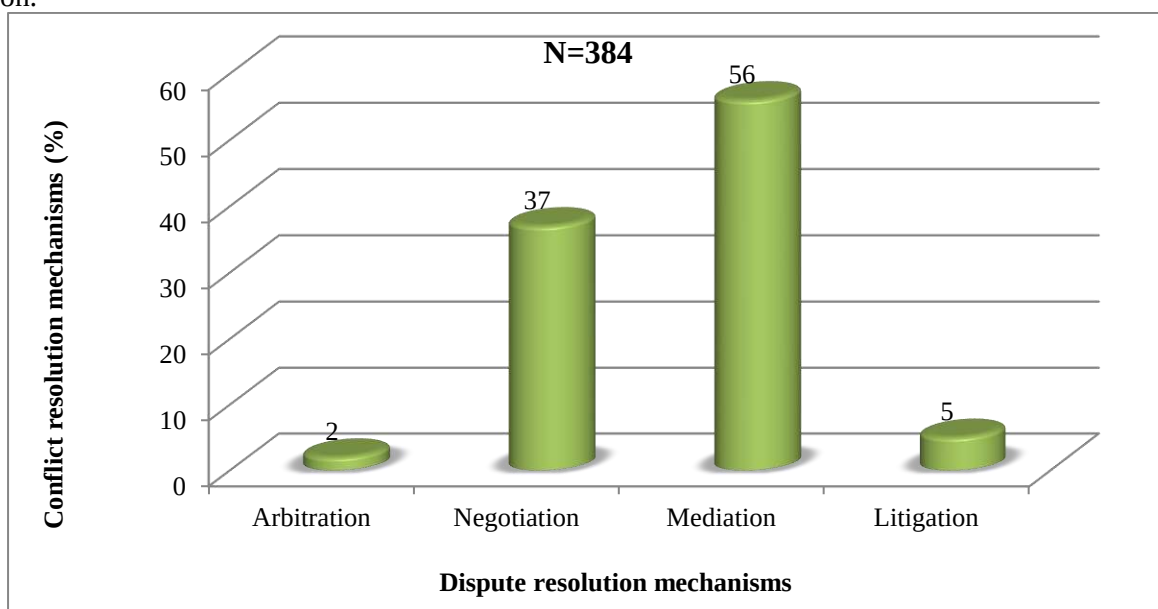


Figure 2

Number of Household Respondents Identifying Each Mechanism

The results show that mediation was ranked number one as the most used and effective strategy employed in conflict resolution 215 (56%). The respondents argued that it supplemented negotiation especially where the need of a neutral party was manifested during the negotiation process. A key informant, an Assistant County Commissioner (5), averred that:

"Resolving conflicts that are more inclined to ethnic background, mediation is the best method of resolving the differences. They are privileged to have volunteers, learned people who offer to sacrifice their resources in

mediating over disputes that pit different parties in Kubasali escarpment in Kakamega and Nandi counties. Mediation has been used effectively especially where we have neutral mediators who impartially adjudicate inter-ethnic feuds. This method has been used to solve conflicts at certain level and it has been recommended and ranked number one" (A key informant, Assistant County Commissioner, Kakamega County, 28/08/2024).

The prominence of mediation was reinforced by key informant interviews, which emphasised the importance of neutral third parties in disputes where mistrust between communities made direct negotiation difficult. One account described a long-standing land-boundary dispute in Tabolwa village that was reportedly settled through a mediator associated with CAMP, an interfaith network identified by participants as Catholic, Anglican, Muslim and Pentecostal representatives.

An NGO representative similarly emphasised the importance of neutrality, stating that:

"Mediation has been successful because they take a direction of a neutral ground for discussion and negotiation of the incompatible goals by the conflicting parties. The mediator is always a neutral person and he or she cannot take sides and as a result, a lasting solution is achieved in most cases due to resolution made by parties in conflicts. The mediators are also trained and qualified people in the field of conflict management and peace building. Therefore their work is to guide the conflicting parties so that they can come to a resolution. At the same time the conflicting parties have got confidence in the mediators and that is why they are ready to listen to them. Due to this provision, most of the inter-ethnic conflicts have been solved by this method in the area of study" (FGD Participants, NGO Officials, Kakamega North Sub-County, 25/08/2024).

These accounts suggest that mediation was valued because it provided a structured setting in which disputants could communicate through a trusted intermediary. However, the findings indicate perceived usefulness rather than independently verified, long-term resolution of all mediated disputes. The reported recurrence of some disputes also points to the importance of monitoring agreements and addressing unresolved grievances.

Negotiation was also most frequently reported mechanism. The respondents contended that several negotiation exercises had been conducted, wherein objective and unbiased negotiators were sought, facilitating a sustainable approach to dispute resolution and serving as purveyors of alternative tactics, including mediation. A religious leader in an FGD stated that:

"Negotiation as a conflict management strategy is a matter of the two conflicting parties to establish the root causes of the conflict and then agree on how they can iron out their differences. However, to a large extent, it has worked effectively in solving inter-ethnic conflicts in the study area. In this scenario the parties should be flexible in making decisions. Negotiations fail because the parties involved lack mutual understanding and respect for one another. Lack of understanding between the Luhya and Nandi in Kubasali escarpment in Kakamega and Nandi counties is a major reason why we have reoccurrence of inter-ethnic conflicts among the two ethnic groups" (FGD participants, religious leaders, Nandi North Sub-County, 22/09/2024).

Observation of a joint baraza involving chiefs from Kakamega and Nandi also documented negotiation over a land-boundary dispute. Nevertheless, participants identified mistrust, inflexibility, disrespect and perceived ethnic favouritism as barriers to agreement. Negotiation therefore appeared to provide an avenue for direct problem-solving, but its application depended partly on the willingness of both parties to listen and compromise.

Arbitration and litigation were less frequently identified. Participants attributed the limited use of arbitration to concerns about the impartiality and competence of decision-makers, political interference and the recurrence of disputes after apparent settlement. Litigation was perceived as costly, time-consuming and difficult to navigate. An interview with a key informant, a police officer indicated that litigation was a costly process for the residents of Kubasali escarpment of Kakamega and Nandi Counties. He avouched that:

"Many residents do not understand litigation as a means to settle disputes. They have not been sensitized to understand how our courts work, the role our lawyers and the role litigators play in negotiating out settlements. They also fear high legal financing of cases. This locks out many who would wish to settle cases through the courts. Its expensive and time consuming. Most of the people believe that litigation is bias in the sense that ruling is based on evidence given in court and in most cases evidence presented is false because those with true evidence fear to appear in courts. Due to this notion litigation has not had enough chance to solve inter-ethnic conflicts in the area of study" (A Key Informant, a police officer, Kakamega County, 13/09/2024).

These findings point to perceived barriers to formal dispute resolution, although the survey figures alone cannot establish whether these mechanisms were objectively less effective. Viewed through Conflict Transformation Theory, the findings suggest that resolving immediate disputes may be insufficient where mistrust, contested claims and strained intercommunity relationships remain unaddressed (Lederach, 1997). Mediation and negotiation may create opportunities to manage disagreements, but their contribution to sustainable peace depends on the perceived fairness of the process, follow-through on agreements and attention to the relationships underlying the dispute (Cheung, 2010).

4.2 Community-based Mechanisms

The household heads were asked other mechanisms mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts in Kubasali escarpment in Kakamega and Nandi Counties.. Beyond mediation, negotiation, arbitration and litigation, respondents identified public participation, social groups, social amenities and intermarriage as additional approaches to mitigating inter-ethnic tensions.

Table 1

Reported community-based mechanism

Mechanism	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Public participation in decision-making	185	48.2	1
Formation of social groups	115	29.9	2
Improvement of social amenities	60	15.6	3
Intermarriage	24	6.3	4
Total	384	100	

Public participation was the most frequently identified community-based mechanism. Participants associated inclusive decision-making with a stronger sense of ownership, greater cooperation and fewer grievances over development initiatives. A Village Elder (10) in an FGD noted that:

"Public participation in decision making in projects proposal and implementation is very important in sustainability of development projects. Projects that involve all ethnic groups on board if it is a community project does not fail. However those projects that are imposed on people always fail. He cited an example of Sang'alo cattle ring whereby the two ethnic groups from Kakamega and Nandi counties were involved in deciding where it should be constructed in Kubasali escarpment and up to now business in cattle selling and buying is very active and its earning the two groups a lot of income hence, improving socio-economic development of the people. Public participation also helped give those in project management committees to do their work peacefully because of low resistance from the public" (FGD participants, Village elders, Nandi North Sub-County, 28/08/2024).

Participants reported that the facility supported livestock trading and interaction across community boundaries. As one participant put it:

"Projects that involve all ethnic groups on board do not fail, unlike those imposed on people. As a result of public participation in most of the activities in Kubasali escarpment, peace has been restored in the study area at a reasonable level" (FGD participants, Kakamega North Sub-County, 18/08/2024)

The example illustrates how shared decisions around public facilities and economic activities may provide common interests across ethnic divisions. This is consistent with Simala (2010), who noted that, public participation is effective as it ensures success and satisfaction of the community through resource contributions, making decisions, sharing tasks with professionals and organizing plans.

Social groups ranked second, with respondents describing self-help groups, women's and youth groups, business associations and community-based organisations as opportunities for cooperation. An NGO official in an FGD noted that:

"Formation of self-help groups, women groups, Youth groups, CBOs and NGOs is a basis of unity regardless of which ethnic group one comes from in Kubasali escarpment in Kakamega and Nandi counties. The groups unite people depending on the activities the group is doing for business, sports etc. At most, these groups usually empower people with knowledge and economically. Once the community is economically well off the prevalence of conflicts are low because people's livelihood is up to date. This creates mutual relationships among the two ethnic groups" (FGD participants, NGO officials, 28/9/2024, Nandi North County).

As evidence of the findings of FGD Participants, NGO officials, formation of self-help groups, women groups, Youth groups, CBOs and NGOs is a basis of unity regardless of which ethnic group one comes from in Kubasali escarpment in Kakamega and Nandi Counties. The groups bring people together depending on what the group is doing for their livelihood. People are empowered with knowledge that can develop them socially and economically to improve on their lives positively. An economically empowered community is well off and the chances of conflicts are minimal because people's livelihood is good creating relationships between the two ethnic groups in the study area (Owori et al., 2019). These findings suggest that cross-community associations may create regular opportunities for cooperation, provided that they are inclusive and adequately managed.

Improvement of social amenities was also identified by respondents as an important factor. Participants referred to schools, markets, religious institutions and sports activities as spaces where people from different communities could interact. Football was particularly highlighted as an opportunity for young people from Kakamega and Nandi to

cooperate. An interview with a member of the council of elders in an FGD indicated that improvement of social amenities was a long-term process for the residents of Kubasali escarpment in Kakamega and Nandi Counties to resolve inter-ethnic conflicts. He avouched that:

"Improvement of social amenities like social clubs and sports unite the residents of a given area as they meet regularly to relax and eat together as the relationship grow and they live peacefully. They also said that, sports has also reduced inter-ethnic conflicts among the youths in the area of study and this is a way of improving unity between the two ethnic groups in Kakamega and Nandi counties. Some youths from Kakamega county are hired to play football for Nandi county in national tournaments. Sports have also made the youths from the Luhya and Nandi ethnic groups to be busy to prevent them to be misused by perpetrators of inter-ethnic conflicts in the study area" (FGD Participants, Council of elders, 16/09/2024, Nandi North Sub-County).

This finding is consistent with Intergroup Contact Theory, which proposes that contact between groups can help reduce prejudice under favourable conditions, particularly where interaction involves cooperation and shared goals (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The results do not, however, establish that the presence of amenities automatically reduces conflict; the nature and quality of the interactions they enable also matter.

Intermarriage was the least frequently identified community-based mechanism. Participants described marriage across ethnic boundaries as a source of kinship, belonging and mutual respect. A member of the council of elders in an FGD signposted that:

"Intermarriages from the past has been used to unite people who have had conflicts for a long time. Once people from different ethnic groups intermarry, there is respect and a sense of belonging is embraced. As a result of intermarriages, historical injustices perpetrated by Luhya ethnic group against them has reduced greatly even though to a few people because others are married outside the two counties. Even those who are not married or married outside the two counties, they have relatives who have married within and this remains a unifying factor" (FGD participants, council of elders, Nandi North Sub-County, 12/09/2024).

As a result of intermarriages, historical injustices perpetrated by clans against other clans have reduced greatly even though to a few people because others are married outside the Sub-County (Owori et al., 2024). However, they also acknowledged that such marriages were relatively limited.

Taken together, the findings indicate that conflict mitigation was understood not only in terms of resolving individual disputes but also in terms of building relationships and shared interests. Public participation and social groups were the most frequently reported of these additional approaches, while social amenities and intermarriage provided further opportunities for interaction.

4.3 Stakeholders Involved in Conflict Management

The study sought to examine the contributions of various organisations in relation to their existing policies in mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts in the study area in regard to peace and conflict resolution. These stakeholders however offer collective and significant contributions in the conflict management in Kubasali escarpment in Kakamega and Nandi Counties.

The antecedent results indicate that religious leaders have played a preponderant role in managing inter-ethnic conflicts. Interpretivism philosophical approach was applied to analyze qualitative data of the results obtained and are presented in Table 2 in which Religious leaders were ranked the best in conflict management 127 (33%) followed by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) 96 (25%), Government authorities 81 (21%), Nyumba Kumi 50 (13%) and council of elders at 30 (8%) respectively within the study area. The Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have also been quite engaged in managing conflicts. Government authorities who ought to be leading in conflict resolution in Kubasali escarpment in Kakamega and Nandi Counties have been lackadaisical and council of elders lukewarm in their critical role which they need to play.

Table 2

Stakeholders identified in conflict management

Stakeholder	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Religious leaders	127	33.1	1
NGOs	96	25	2
Government authorities	81	21.1	3
Nyumba Kumi	50	13	4
Councils of elders	30	7.8	5
Total	384	100	

Religious leaders were frequently associated with peace messaging, dialogue and reconciliation. Their perceived contribution appeared to rest partly on their ability to convene people and draw on established community relationships. A member of the council of elders (3) in an FGD averred:

"Religion from the past has been used to unite people who have had conflicts for a long time. Once people from different ethnic groups are brought together by religious leaders when they are in conflicts they are ready to listen to the direction given by the religious leaders to live at peace. Thus, there is respect and a sense of belonging embraced by the two ethnic groups. Religious leaders play a very crucial role in mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts in Kubasali escarpment in Kakamega and Nandi counties. The overall work religious leaders do is, preaching peace in churches and mosques and in any public forums" (FGD Participants, council of elders, Nandi County, 22/09/2024).

Participants also identified interfaith engagement as a means of bringing disputants into discussion. This finding complements the qualitative accounts of mediation, in which trust and neutrality were viewed as important conditions for resolving disputes. Marshal (2007) states that participants in the process of reconciling conflicting parties often look to religion in a special way both because religious elements may be seen as contributing to conflict and because religions can bring to bear deep traditions of forgiveness and peace-making, but most religions can offer teachings and practices that can propel or improve process of reconciliation. This has been the case with most religious organizations that have pitched various tents in Kakamega and Nandi Counties.

NGOs were identified by one-quarter of respondents. Participants described their activities as including peace education, mediation, early warning, humanitarian assistance and livelihood support. A key informant, a Chief (6) signposted that:

"Non-governmental organizations have played a major role in mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts in Kubasali escarpment in Kakamega and Nandi counties to unite the Luhya and Nandi ethnic groups who have had conflicts for a long time since 1992 up to date. During inter-ethnic conflicts, they provide humanitarian assistance ranging from food, shelter and clothings. They also empower the society economically by fast tracking income generating activities to make people stable economically. This makes people to remain committed rather than engaging in conflicts. Thus, this is a clear proof that Non-governmental organizations play a very crucial role in mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts in Kubasali escarpment in Kakamega and Nandi counties" (Key informant, a Chief, Chesumei Sub-County, 02/09/2024).

These accounts indicate that NGOs were perceived as contributing both to immediate responses to conflict and to longer-term community engagement. In this context Lennart (2005), indicated that international community aimed at preventing the escalation of conflict and contributing to a process of sustainable peace in conflict zones. In Kenya there have been and still are NGOs like USAID, UNDP, World Vision, and Action Aid and many others offering humanitarian and directly involved in conflict resolution in Kakamega and Nandi counties.

Government authorities were identified by 21.1% of respondents. Their roles included maintaining security, responding to violent incidents, arresting alleged perpetrators and facilitating local dispute resolution. Accounts were mixed: some participants recognised government interventions, while others characterised the response as largely reactive, occurring after tensions had escalated. The foregoing assertion was supported by a key informant; a victim of inter-ethnic conflicts (5) avouched that:

"The government and its agents have not done a good job. They have not utilized their machineries and institutions of conflict management in the society. Residents of Kubasali escarpment of Kakamega and Nandi counties have not benefited from Government's services very well because they still experience inter-ethnic conflicts. The work by the government officials is witnessed during the times of violent conflicts by intervention through the police and other security agents. They have not had initiatives of coming up with mitigation measures of conflicts. Therefore, the government officers starting from Assistant chiefs up to Regional commissioners should come up with initiatives to mitigate these conflicts to give room for socio-economic development" (A key informant, a victim, Kakamega North Sub-County, 07/09/2024).

Muigui (2015) noted that Kenya's history has been marred with inequality, curtailed freedom, autocracy, social injustice and widespread inter-ethnic conflict. This argument is due to inept government structures that have been put in place in certain areas and Kakamega and Nandi Counties have been victims of undue mechanism. The findings therefore point to a perceived need for more consistent preventive engagement and coordination between government agencies and community-based actors.

Nyumba Kumi was identified by 13.0% of respondents. Participants associated the initiative with local peace messaging and community-level information sharing, but described its reach and capacity as limited. A key informant, a Ward Administrator from Kakamega County signposted that:

"Nyumba Kumi have played a role in mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts in Kubasali escarpment in Kakamega and Nandi counties to unite the Luhya and Nandi ethnic groups who have had conflicts for a long time but on a smaller scale. During inter-ethnic conflicts, they guide their people not to engage in fights and after conflicts

they advise their people on the importance of embracing peace in the community. This makes people at Nyumba Kumi level to understand what is expected of them in peace building within the society to minimize conflicts in the study area. This proves that, Nyumba Kumi play a very important role in mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts in Kubasali escarpment in Kakamega and Nandi counties even though on a minimal scale" (Key informant, a Ward Administrator, Kakamega North Sub-County, 24/09/2024).

Botha (2013) noted that the police have a critical role of engaging with local communities to increase their ability to identify individuals at risk of inter-ethnic conflicts. Nyumba Kumi initiative is associated with streamlining security matters among communities, is a strategy that when well implemented can help address inter-ethnic conflicts. Mkutu et al. (2014) argument, correspond to the immediate claim, that, protection Act needs fastening in order to help gathering sufficient intelligence needed to intervene inter-ethnic conflicts. They indicate among other issues, that the public complain about failure of rapid response to crime, petty corruption, and poor protection of witnesses and police brutality as hindrances in militating against inter-ethnic conflict. Such fears, they note, have hampered peace initiatives and exacerbated illegal forms of community 'security', (in the name of defending our clans) thus Nyumba Kumi initiative has still been elusive concept to some extent.

4.4 Implications for Sustainable Conflict Mitigation

Across the three themes, four implications emerge from the findings. First, mediation and negotiation are central to the approaches reported by respondents. Strengthening mediator training, perceived neutrality, inclusive participation and follow-up on agreements may help address the limitations identified by participants.

Second, community participation and cross-community groups offer opportunities to build shared interests. Development projects and local associations may be more constructive when both communities have meaningful roles in decisions, implementation and oversight.

Third, shared social spaces may support intergroup cooperation. Schools, markets, sports activities and other facilities can create opportunities for contact, although their contribution depends on whether participation is inclusive and constructive.

Finally, religious leaders, NGOs, government authorities, Nyumba Kumi and councils of elders may have complementary roles. Better coordination could connect local dialogue and early warning with administrative support, security responses and longer-term peacebuilding.

These implications align with Conflict Transformation Theory's emphasis on relationships and underlying grievances (Lederach, 1997), and with Intergroup Contact Theory's emphasis on constructive contact across group boundaries (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The study's evidence supports treating these mechanisms as locally reported approaches with potential value, while avoiding the assumption that any one approach is sufficient to ensure sustainable peace.

V. CONCLUSION & RECCOMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study interrogated mechanisms mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts between the Luhya and Nandi communities in Kubasali Escarpment, Kakamega and Nandi counties. The findings indicate that conflict mitigation involved formal and informal dispute-resolution processes, community-based initiatives and multiple institutional stakeholders.

Mediation was the most frequently reported dispute-resolution mechanism, followed by negotiation, while litigation and arbitration were less frequently identified. Participants associated mediation with the availability of neutral third parties and opportunities for constructive dialogue. However, mistrust, perceived ethnic favouritism, limited conflict-management skills and the recurrence of some disputes constrained the application of dispute-resolution mechanisms.

Public participation was the most frequently reported community-based approach, followed by the formation of social groups, improvement of social amenities and intermarriage. These approaches were associated with shared decision-making, cooperation and opportunities for interaction across ethnic boundaries. Their contribution nevertheless depended on inclusive participation, sustained engagement and effective management.

Religious leaders and non-governmental organisations were the most frequently identified stakeholder groups, followed by government authorities, Nyumba Kumi and councils of elders. Although these actors contributed to peace messaging, dialogue, security and community support, participants identified limitations relating to coordination, institutional capacity, impartiality and preventive intervention.

Overall, the findings suggest that mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts in Kubasali Escarpment requires more than resolving individual disputes. Sustainable peacebuilding also requires attention to community relationships, inclusive decision-making, the implementation of agreements and coordinated action among formal institutions and community-

based stakeholders. The findings identify locally reported approaches that merit strengthening, rather than establishing that any single mechanism independently guarantees lasting peace.

5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends strengthening mediation and negotiation through targeted training for government administrators, religious leaders and other peacebuilding actors. These efforts should promote impartial dispute resolution, inclusive dialogue and systematic follow-up on agreements to minimise the recurrence of disputes.

County and national government agencies should promote inclusive community participation in decisions concerning shared resources, development projects and local conflict-management initiatives. Involving both the Luhya and Nandi communities in planning and implementation can enhance transparency, trust and ownership of decisions.

Peacebuilding organisations and local administrators should also support cross-community social groups, including youth, women, business and self-help groups, to strengthen cooperation, promote shared economic interests and encourage sustained interaction between the two communities. In addition, government authorities, religious leaders, NGOs, Nyumba Kumi and councils of elders should improve coordination in early warning, dialogue, dispute referral and monitoring of peace agreements.

The capacity of local institutions should be strengthened through training in conflict management, mediation, impartiality and community engagement. Relevant justice-sector institutions and legal-aid providers should improve public awareness of court procedures, available legal assistance and appropriate mechanisms for resolving land and boundary disputes. Finally, stakeholders should periodically monitor conflict-mitigation initiatives by assessing agreement implementation, recurrence of disputes, community participation and perceptions of fairness. Such monitoring would help identify approaches that contribute to sustainable peaceful coexistence in Kubasali Escarpment.

Declaration of Interest

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