

East Africa

Regional perspectives for the White Paper on Peacebuilding

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Introduction

Much of East Africa, especially the Greater Horn of Africa, has been the site of some of the most intractable armed conflicts in Africa, and continues to be the scene of some of the greatest frustrations and setbacks for international peacebuilding efforts. This stands in contrast to more positive recent trends in peacebuilding in other parts of Africa. At the time of writing, the hard-won peace in South Sudan has disintegrated into armed violence that has led to 800,000 internally displaced persons, 250,000 new refugees and the possibility of a major famine. Sudan is beset by armed rebellions in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile. Somalia remains a failed state and is wracked by political violence, communal clashes and an urban guerrilla war waged by the jihadi group al-Shabaab. Kenya is struggling to cope with al-Shabaab terrorist attacks, has mounted an ill-advised security campaign against its large Somali population and remains beset by deep ethnic and sectarian tensions. The two most peaceful countries in the region – Ethiopia and Eritrea – are led by some of the most authoritarian governments in Africa and maintain a 'negative peace' imposed by fear and repression. Their contested border remains one of the most militarised pieces of real estate in Africa, a legacy of the bloody, unresolved war they fought in 1998-2000. This sobering current situation forms part of a much longer tapestry of armed conflict across the majority of the region.

Over the past three decades, East Africa's crises of war, political violence and violent extremism have commanded global attention on a major scale. But regional and international responses have only occasionally produced desired solutions and, in some instances, have made things worse. The region's persistent armed conflicts have resulted in the greatest concentration of peacekeeping forces in the world. At present, 74,000 uniformed personnel serve in the five United Nations (UN) or African Union (AU) peace operations from eastern Democratic Republic of Congo to Sudan to Somalia. The region has also been the target of a series of high-level diplomatic missions and interventions designed to broker peace or, in the case of Kenya's post-election violence in 2008, prevent political violence from spiralling into civil war. Post-

The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform is a joint project of four institutions:



war transitional governments across the region have been the object of extensive statebuilding and peacebuilding assistance as well. International efforts to enforce greater accountability in East Africa have resulted in UN arms embargoes, robust monitoring of and sanctions against violators of arms embargoes, and indictments by the International Criminal Court (ICC) against two sitting heads of state in the region.

Challenges to building peace in East Africa

East Africa's crises are diverse, making region-wide generalisation difficult. Still, some challenges to peacebuilding appear in most or all of the countries of the region. They include the following:

History of civil war. The literature on civil war consistently concludes that one of the top predictors of a civil war is a recent previous civil war. Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda and Ethiopia/Eritrea have all been through civil wars in the past, which have produced deep social divisions and grievances that have increased their vulnerability to backsliding into renewed war. Kenya's post-electoral violence did not reach a state of civil war but generated levels of displacement and ethnic polarisation that are arguably comparable to legacies of civil war.

Ethnic cleansing. Many of East Africa's armed crises – full-scale civil wars, the many communal clashes that have been exacerbated by or have spun off of civil wars and political violence that stopped short of war – have involved some type of large-scale displacement off the land (the fate of the losing side) and land-grabbing (by the winners). Darfur is the most egregious example of ethnic cleansing as a principal driver of the war. Somalia's civil war in 1991-92 resulted in massive ethnic cleansing and the occupation of urban and rural real estate by stronger clans that remains a major impediment to peace. Many communal clashes have resulted in groups being intentionally displaced from ancestral land. Loss of land is the source of deep-seated grievances that render groups more inclined to take up arms.

Land. Land disputes – over access, titling and rights – are central to the story of armed conflicts across the region. The violence in Kenya in 2008 was triggered by election results, but driven by long-standing communal tensions over land dating back to the colonial era and produced displacement from land that is not resolved. Across the region, disputes over land ownership and access are ubiquitous, dangerous and diverse, including communal fights over disputed land and water, individual clashes over land titles in peri-urban spaces, land-grabbing of valuable property by corrupt officials and enormous land leasing deals by governments that displace hundreds of thousands of small-scale farmers and pastoralists. Land scarcity is worsened by rapid population growth. Anxiety over land is heightened by weak and unreliable government land titling systems, and that anxiety is easily exploited by violence entrepreneurs.

Government complicity in war and political violence. Across the region, state authorities whose principal obligation is to protect their citizens have instead been complicit in violence against them. When governments purposefully orchestrate political violence against sections of their own population as a form of collective punishment or to advance parochial political agendas, they erode their own legitimacy and drive communities to support insurgencies. This dynamic also robs international peacebuilders of viable government partners with whom to work.

Weak Government. With the exceptions of Ethiopia and Eritrea, most of the governments in East Africa and the Horn are weak, and, in varying degrees, lack the capacity to extend authority

into remote border areas. As a result, even when governments are well-intentioned, they cannot control armed violence in parts of the countryside. One common government tactic to address this has been reliance on paramilitaries, often deputised as 'local protection forces'. This has led to serious abuses as para-militaries pursue tribal or clan agendas at the expense of rivals. Government weakness has also manifested itself in an inability to exercise command and control over its national security forces, some of which are organised along communal lines. For instance, clan-based brigades in Somalia are a major source of insecurity for populations in areas recovered from the jihadi group al-Shabaab, and tribally based military units in South Sudan have clashed with one another in the recent violence there.

Bad governance. Politics across most of the region – whether authoritarian, democratic or sectarian – has only rarely reflected a social contract and a respect for constitutional processes that allow citizens to pursue their interest and justice through normal political and legal channels. High levels of corruption, patronage and/or repression have meant that citizens and groups out of power see little hope in turning to the government to voice grievances. This increases the likelihood of groups resorting to armed insurgency.

Accountability-free zones and transitional justice. Regional heads of state have not only failed to pressure one another to honour their 'responsibility to protect' their own citizens, but have instead devoted considerable political energy to combatting any attempts to hold leaders accountable for crimes against humanity. Regional heads of state agree on few things, but they have been one voice in condemning the ICC. In consequence, a culture of impunity pervades the region. The only post-war justice that has been applied has been against defeated parties – in Rwanda post-1994 and Ethiopia post-1991.

Proxy wars. East Africa's wars and communal violence have often been fuelled and manipulated by external actors, mainly from within the region itself. Regional governments have professed commitment to collective peacebuilding via the regional organisation, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), but in practice have backed armed insurgents against one another.

Violence entrepreneurs. The protracted nature of armed conflict in the region has given rise to a range of different actors whose political or economic interests are best served by perpetuating some degree of political violence, communal polarisation, extremism or lawlessness. These violence entrepreneurs include warlords, political figures and business people at the commanding heights of the war economy, down to local militia commanders and criminal gangs eking out a livelihood from looting, cattle rustling or extortion. Violence entrepreneurs include political figures who are skilled at exploiting and enflaming ethnic tensions for parochial gain.

Spoilers. While some spoilers are 'total spoilers' – warlords, jihadis and others who have no interest in any peace – most regional spoilers are situational; that is, they block accords and undermine peace because they perceive the particular details of the peace as working against them or failing to include them. The fragility of post-conflict settings in the region gives spoilers easy ability to unravel peace accords they find threatening.

Small arms proliferation. The ubiquity of small arms across the region has made communal clashes much more lethal and has rendered the entire region more vulnerable to armed clashes.

Statebuilding and transitional governments. Post-war efforts to establish transitional governments, write new constitutions and revive state capacity in East Africa have been conflict-producing exercises, as they ultimately determine the question over which protagonists fought on the battlefield: who rules? Statebuilding efforts by the international community have not always been adequately attuned to the fact that building the capacity of the state creates winners and losers in a context of low trust and government legitimacy.

Political devolution. Political decentralisation initiatives across parts of East Africa have been meant to improve democratic voice, local ownership and government accountability. But they have also created political tensions and armed clashes over county or federal state borders, and have frequently been understood locally to serve as zones of exclusive or hegemonic ethnic rights, exacerbating communal tensions and even leading to localised ethnic cleansing.

Economic factors. Economic conditions associated with vulnerability to armed conflict are present across the region: high rates of poverty, growing income inequality and high dependence on primary products exports. Oil extraction has expanded national budgets in some East Africa states but, as in many other zones where extractive industries develop in a context of weak and corrupt government, the rentier state that results is the focus of even more intense political struggles.

Social pressures. East Africa is facing a number of powerful social trends that increase susceptibility to instability or armed conflict, including rapid population growth and a youth bulge; rural distress; rapid urbanisation; and rising religious intolerance and extremism.

Interventions. External armed interventions in the region's crises (UN, AU and unilateral) have had mixed results and at times have exacerbated the conflicts they meant to quell. Regional states have been exceptionally active in intervening militarily in other states' armed conflicts.

Violent extremism. Violent extremist ideologies in East Africa include ethnic and tribal chauvinism expressed in hate media. The radical jihadi group al-Shabaab is by far the most dangerous and destabilising example of violent extremism in East Africa and has spread from Somalia into Kenya, Tanzania and other regional states. It recruits from marginalised Muslim populations and from the desperate underclass of slum-dwellers and refugees in the region.

Opportunities for building peace in East Africa

Despite this gloomy inventory of challenges, windows of opportunity do exist in the region. Many factors that could promote peacebuilding can also be a force for armed conflict – much depends on local context. Our survey of countries in East Africa identified several worth highlighting.

Growing elite consensus on the need for new governance. In Sudan, political elites are collectively acknowledging that the current governing system there is broken. This is resulting in efforts across the political spectrum to promote the idea of a national dialogue to end the decades of dominance by a core group in and around Khartoum at the expenses of the country's many marginalised groups in the periphery. In some other troubled East African states, this same discussion among elites – mainly in civil society and the diaspora – is occurring as well

and offers the prospect of a rising peace constituency. Kenya's ability to step back from the brink of civil war in 2008 was widely attributed to the determined efforts of its vibrant civil society.

Resilient social contracts. Many areas of the region have remained peaceful despite the presence of powerful conflict drivers. Somaliland, for instance, has maintained peaceful, stable conditions for a generation. The resilience of communities to conflict drivers can be attributed to many factors – one of the most important of which is the strong social contracts governing relations between ethnic groups, and between local governments and society. These social contracts limiting recourse to political violence are maintained by diverse sources, including business interests, religious communities and customary authorities.

Transformational economic possibilities. Across East Africa, new discoveries of hydrocarbons offer the possibility of dramatic new levels of revenues. Ambitious infrastructure projects offer potential for region-wide transport networks and energy grids. Foreign investment is also showing growing interest in the region. The possibilities for transformational new levels of economic growth and investment could have clarifying effects on political calculations in the region. Whether this possible windfall of new investment and revenue occurs and whether it has a positive or negative impact on peacebuilding in the region will depend on the commitment of regional leaders to promote peace and good governance. Visions of rapid development have the potential to change political behaviour in ways that could consolidate peace.

War weariness. Parts of East Africa that have been most affected by armed conflict have seen a drop in public support for political violence. The most vivid example of this is in Somalia, where al-Shabaab once enjoyed strong public support, but today has lost most of that support as the public has turned against its gratuitous use of violence and its extremism. The group is still a serious threat in the region, but without public support it will face mounting operational problems.

IGAD. For all of its flaws – the deep internal division of member-states and the perception that it is dominated by Ethiopia – the existence of a regional organisation dedicated to the promotion of conflict prevention, such as IGAD, is an asset.

Required support for peacebuilding and the role of the UN

Regional governments and populations in East Africa and the Horn are on the whole suspicious of external peacebuilding efforts, partly because so few have borne fruit over the years and partly because the international community – including the UN – has been fiercely criticised by almost every government in the region for 'meddling' in the sovereign affairs of the state. There is, in short, less goodwill to work with than in the past. Nonetheless, external support to and pressure for peacebuilding remains indispensable.

Our survey of east African countries identifies several especially critical roles:

Continued support for local-level peacebuilding. Careful, well-informed and timely support to local actors engaged in peacebuilding at the grassroots level has worked and continues to benefit from external assistance.

Promotion of inclusive national dialogue. One of the recurring shortfalls of peace accords in the region has been inadequate representation – talks have too often involved a narrow range of

leaders, leaving many third parties feeling left out and inclined to serve as spoilers. External support for national dialogue is critical to provide essential political space for political leaders and opinion shapers to explore avenues for compromise, to build trust and to forge working coalitions across conflict lines. Ensuring these dialogues are adequately inclusive is an important task for outside mediators. In East Africa's multi-sectarian states, routinised inter-religious dialogue is of special importance.

Promotion of good governance. Poor governance is at the heart of much of the conflict in East Africa. Improving it is principally the task of the national leadership in these states, but timely external support – designed to combine capacity building with mechanisms built to ensure accountability and the restraint of the abuse of power – is essential.

Strengthening hybrid governance. East Africa's weak states will not be able to manage all of the conflicts they face for some time to come – institution building is a long, slow process. Meanwhile, informal sources of governance and authority are often key to peacebuilding. Helping governments to understand appropriate partnerships with non-state actors in hybrid governance arrangements to promote peace is a role the international community can play.

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About this Paper: This paper is part of a series providing regional peacebuilding perspectives for the White Paper on Peacebuilding. The authors' task was to provide an authentic, original and honest analysis about three questions: (1) What are the main challenges for building peace in your region? (2) What are the key opportunities for building peace in your region over the next one or two years? (3) What would be the key support necessary to build peace in your region over the next one or two years? Is there any specific role for the UN?

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About the White Paper on Peacebuilding: The White Paper on Peacebuilding is a collaborative, multi-stakeholder process initiated by the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform and supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. It has the objective to situate UN peacebuilding within the broader peacebuilding universe and to articulate visions for the future for building peace in violent and fragile contexts. The White Paper places peacebuilding within the changing characteristics of armed violence and security, and within the practical evidence of engagements in peacebuilding contexts emanating from a diversity of fields. Ensuring a better relationship between UN peacebuilding and the broader peacebuilding field is a complementary effort to the existing work surrounding the 10-year review of the UN peacebuilding architecture and an effort to take stock of the nature and evolution of the broader peacebuilding universe.

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