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Engaging local Community in peace building: The case of the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon

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Abstract

The current crisis in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon has been characterized by violence, loss of lives, and destruction of property. In this article, the paper explores the role of community engagement in peace building in these regions. The paper draws on literature review and qualitative data from focus group discussions and interviews with community members, civil society organizations and government officials. This study was carried out within the ambit of the Participatory Development Theory (PDT). This theory is a widely used approach in community engagement for peace building. The findings suggest that community engagement is crucial in building sustainable peace in these regions. This is so because the community can better understand where the problem lays. The paper went further to identify the various community groups that could be engage in the process among which is Religious leaders, traditional rulers ,youths ,women and civil society organisations. The paper recommend the development of peace education programs, the promotion of intercultural

dialogue and the inclusion of women and youth in peace building efforts especially those resident in the communities .

Key words: *Conflict resolution, community-based peace building*

Introduction

Community engagement is critical to achieving sustainable peacebuilding outcomes, as it involves the active participation of local communities in the design, implementation, and monitoring of peacebuilding programs. Through community engagement, stakeholders can better understand the root causes of conflict and identify locally appropriate solutions that resonate with the affected population. The North West and South West Regions of Cameroon have been engulfed in a crisis since 2016. English-speaking Cameroonians have been protesting the marginalization and discrimination they face in the hands of the French-speaking government. The crisis has resulted in violence, loss of lives, and damage to property. In this article, the paper explores the role of community engagement in peace building in these regions.

Statement of the problem

The crisis that has rocked the two English-speaking regions of the country from a mere protest to what we have today as an armed conflict has had far-reaching devastating effects in the North West and South West Regions of the Country with more than 400,000 forced to flee their homes, with thousands losing lives as well as continues hardship in these two regions (OCHA, 2017). The crisis according to teachers and lawyers was inspired by the marginalization of English-speaking regions with a lack of basic amenities in the two regions and the fact that most Anglophone elites do not occupy strategic positions in the central government predominantly run by Francophone. Despite efforts made by government partners to lure the Cameroon government to engage in peace talks, the government and the separatist have remained adamant about peace

talks. This study would therefore engage the community in identifying projects as well as participating in the execution of projects as a way of providing these basic amenities as a way of building peace. This is to solve the problem of “everything coming from Yaoundé the capital to bottom-top” The stakeholders in the communities to identify these projects are religious authorities, traditional heads, civil society organizations, traditional rulers and development associations based in the various communities. This research, therefore, set out to examine the role the community can play in peace building in the two regions.

Literature Review

Previous studies have shown that community engagement is an essential component of peace building (Borton, 2017; Lederach, 2015). Community engagement involves the active participation of community members in decision-making processes that affect their lives (World Bank, 2018). Community engagement is crucial because it creates ownership and sustainability of peace building efforts (World Bank, 2018). One of the key aspects of successful community engagement in peacebuilding is to involve local communities in conflict prevention and resolution efforts from the very beginning. This includes establishing mechanisms for regular dialogue and consultation, such as participatory planning and budgeting processes, and community-based monitoring and evaluation systems. For example, in Rwanda, the government has established local peace committees that work closely with community leaders to identify and address sources of conflict (Oshikawa, 2011). Similarly, in Sierra Leone, community-led reconciliation and dialogue processes have been developed to promote cooperation and understanding between different groups (Human Security Gateway, 2012).

Another important aspect of community engagement in peacebuilding is the inclusion of marginalized and vulnerable groups, such as women, youth, and internally displaced persons. This involves building a safe space for discussion and dialogue in which they can articulate their

concerns and ideas, and have a say in the decisions that will affect their communities. For example, in Liberia, women's peacebuilding networks have been instrumental in advocating for inclusive peacebuilding efforts that reflect the perspectives of women and other marginalized groups (Berhe, 2010). Finally, the success of community engagement in peacebuilding also depends on the availability of resources and capacity building for stakeholders. This includes training programs and workshops that equip local communities with the skills and knowledge needed to actively participate in peacebuilding initiatives. For instance, in Nepal, local peace committees have undergone training on conflict analysis and resolution, enabling them to identify and address sources of conflict in their communities (UNDP, 2021).

Theoretical framework

Participatory Development Theory (PDT) is a widely used approach in community engagement for peacebuilding. PDT emphasizes community participation in decision-making processes and the prioritization of the needs and interests of the community in development projects. According to Escobar (1992), PDT is grounded in the idea that “people have the right to control their own development and they can do this through direct participation in decision-making”. The participatory approach is important in community engagement for peacebuilding, as it fosters community ownership of projects and decisions, building trust among community members and local leaders, and ensuring that the long-term interests of the community are prioritized. For instance, in South Africa, the adoption of PDT through community-led development significantly contributed to the country’s post-apartheid peacebuilding process. Studies show that the participatory approach enabled communities to articulate their own needs, prioritize projects, and drive development agendas. This approach sustained a long-lasting peace within communities (Fuseini & Belko, 2019). Furthermore; PDT promotes local knowledge and expertise, which is a key factor in ensuring that peacebuilding efforts are context-specific,

culturally relevant, and sustainable. This ensures that the peacebuilding process is not a solely top-down approach but is inclusive of local voices, which is vital in promoting ownership of peacebuilding efforts (Yamanaka & Ishikawa, 2016).

In addition to the benefits mentioned, PDT has also been recognized for its potential to promote gender equality and social inclusion in community engagement for peacebuilding efforts. By involving diverse community members, including women and marginalized groups, in decision-making processes, PDT helps ensure that the voices of these groups are heard and their needs are met. This approach also promotes a sense of collective responsibility for peacebuilding efforts, which can lead to increased social cohesion and reduced conflict (Djiraibe, 2020).

However, PDT has been criticized for its potential to reinforce existing power structures within communities. Some argue that participatory processes may favor better-educated or wealthier community members, giving them disproportionate influence over decision-making processes. Therefore, it is important to implement PDT with caution, carefully considering power dynamics within the community, and taking steps to ensure that all voices are heard (Rudgard, 2019).

Despite the challenges, PDT remains a valuable approach in community engagement for peacebuilding. It offers an alternative to traditional top-down development interventions, promoting community-led development and peacebuilding efforts that are context-specific and sustainable.

Methodology

The study use focus group discussions and interviews with community members, civil society organizations and government officials in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon. The focus group discussions and interviews were conducted in English, Pidgin English, and local languages. The paper used purposive sampling to select participants.

Findings

Participants suggested that the government and civil society organizations should develop peace education programs that educate community members on conflict prevention, management, and resolution. Participants felt that peace education programs would equip community members with the necessary skills and knowledge to resolve conflicts peacefully. They felt that intercultural dialogue was crucial in building peaceful coexistence between English-speaking and French-speaking Cameroonians. Participants recommended that intercultural dialogue programs be developed to promote understanding and respect for each other's cultural differences.

Participants emphasized the importance of including women and youth in peace building efforts.

Participants are of the opinion that women and youth had unique perspectives and experiences that could contribute to peace building.

Ngong (2020) examines the role of community engagement in peace building efforts in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon. The author draws on qualitative data from interviews with community members, civil society organizations, and government officials to highlight the importance of community engagement in building sustainable peace. On his part Mokake (2021) analyzes the role of community engagement in peacebuilding in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon. The author uses a case study approach, drawing on qualitative research that includes focus group discussions with conflict stakeholders, individual interviews with civil society actors, and community leaders as well as government officials.

Mokake highlights the importance of community engagement in peacebuilding and underscores the role of community-led interventions in the restoration and sustained maintenance of peace in Cameroon.

The study found out that ,The Southwest Northwest Women's Taskforce , an organization working to promote peace and reconciliation in the North West and South West regions have a number of projects that are being carried out at empowering women and girls, and as well as building trust and cooperation between different groups in society. For example, the Southwest Northwest Women's Taskforce has organized a number of peace dialogues between women from different communities. These dialogues have helped to build trust and understanding, and have led to the development of a number of peacebuilding initiatives.

The study further found out that The Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA), an NGO is working in the various communities to promote human rights and democracy in Cameroon. They have a number of projects in the North West and South West regions that are aimed at promoting peacebuilding through community engagement. CHRDA has worked with local communities to develop a number of peacebuilding initiatives. For example, they have organized peace marches, peace education workshops, and mediation sessions. They have also worked to support the work of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms likewise The German Development Agency (GIZ): This government agency is working to promote development in developing countries. They have worked with local communities to develop a number of peacebuilding initiatives. For example, they have supported the work of community-based peacebuilding organizations, and they have provided training in peacebuilding skills.

Activities carried out by local communities in peace Building

1. Conflict prevention: Local communities can engage in various activities to prevent conflicts, including early warning and early response mechanisms, community-based dialogue, and community policing. For example, in Kenya, local communities have established peace committees, which monitor early warning indicators such as political tensions, resource competition, and cultural differences, and take necessary steps to

address them before they escalate into violent conflicts (Musila et al., 2017). The peace committees also work closely with the police and other state institutions to promote community policing and to ensure that law and order is maintained.

2. **Conflict resolution:** Local communities can play a central role in resolving conflicts through traditional conflict resolution mechanisms such as mediation, negotiation, and reconciliation. For instance, in Liberia, traditional leaders have played a substantial role in mediating conflicts and promoting reconciliation between different ethnic groups. They have organized various conflict resolution processes such as peace forums, truth and reconciliation commissions, and informal mediation processes (Berhe, 2010). Similarly, in Sierra Leone, community-led reconciliation and dialogue processes have been developed to promote cooperation and understanding between different groups (Human Security Gateway, 2012).
3. **Post-conflict reconstruction and development:** Local communities can contribute to rebuilding and developing their communities by engaging in activities such as rebuilding infrastructure, rehabilitating social services, and creating opportunities for economic growth. This can involve activities such as community-driven development initiatives, participatory planning and budgeting, and capacity building. For example, in Rwanda, local communities have worked closely with NGOs and government agencies to rebuild schools, health centers, and other public infrastructures that were destroyed during the civil war (Ciccone et al., 2017). They have also participated in agricultural and environmental projects that promote economic growth and sustainable development.

Community Actors in Peace building

Traditional Leaders

Traditional rulers have been identified as important stakeholders in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon. These traditional authorities are recognized as legitimate representatives of their communities and play a central role in resolving conflicts that arise within these communities. The traditional rulers have significant influence over their communities as they are often seen as custodians of customs and traditions, and are seen as mediators and arbitrators in local disputes (Brown, 2021). In the current Anglophone crisis, traditional rulers have been working towards promoting peace and reconciliation by engaging in dialogue with other community leaders and members from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. They have been instrumental in developing community-level approaches to conflict resolution, building trust between communities, and promoting intergroup relations. In addition, traditional rulers have been actively engaging with national authorities to bring an end to the conflict. They have been advocating for a comprehensive and inclusive dialogue, which involves all the stakeholders in the conflict, to address the root causes of the crisis and find a lasting solution. Traditional rulers have been Convening Peace Meetings with quarter heads in their various villages to understand what need to be done. These meetings provide a platform for dialogue and the exchange of ideas for conflict resolution. Community Awareness and Sensitization: Traditional rulers have been raising awareness about the importance of peace and reconciliation in their respective communities. They have been using their status and influence to encourage community members to embrace peaceful coexistence and to reject violence. The case of the Fon of Oku, chief Mukete of the South West Region and other fons of the North West who have been instrumental. Traditional rulers have been collaborating with Humanitarian Assistance organisations to provide assistance to those affected by the conflict. They have been helping to distribute food and non-food items, and providing support to those who have been displaced by the fighting (Fonkem, 2019).

Civil society organisations

Civil society organizations can play an important role in building peace in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon if they are engaged in the peace building process .Civil society organizations can facilitate dialogue between different communities, local authorities, businesses, and other stakeholders to help resolve conflicts and build trust. They can create safe spaces where people can express their concerns and work towards common goals.Also, Civil society organizations can advocate for peace and human rights. They can raise awareness about the effects of the conflict and the need for a peaceful resolution. This will help to build a strong support base for peace initiatives and increase pressure on actors to seek peaceful solutions to the conflict. Further, Civil society organizations can work to build the capacity of local actors to engage in peacebuilding activities. They can provide training in conflict resolution, mediation, and negotiation to community leaders, local government officials, and other stakeholders. This will help to build sustainable, community-led peacebuilding initiatives.Also, Community-based initiatives: Civil society organizations can implement community-based initiatives, such as peace clubs, sports tournaments, and cultural events, to promote peaceful interaction and cooperation between communities. These initiatives can help to break down stereotypes and build bridges between divided communities (Nakum, & Nambu,2020).

Religious leaders

Religious leaders can contribute to peacebuilding efforts in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, owing to their moral authority and influence in society. Firstly, Mediation and Conflict Resolution: Religious leaders can take on a mediator role in resolving conflicts in the Anglophone regions. They can help in resolving differences between communities, engaging with other stakeholders, and encouraging dialogue to build consensus. They can

bring a sense of neutrality and impartiality to conflict resolution processes, increasing their effectiveness (Ngong, 2018). Also, **Advocacy for Peace:** Religious leaders can advocate for peace in the region. They can use their platforms to put a spotlight on the suffering caused by the conflict and appeal to stakeholders to look for peaceful, sustainable solutions. They can communicate messages of peace and harmony to their congregations and larger communities. **Interfaith Cooperation:** Religious leaders can foster interfaith cooperation and dialogue among different religious groups in the Anglophone regions. This can promote mutual understanding, respect, and solidarity among communities with different religious beliefs. This can enhance social cohesion and undermine the potential for religious-based conflict (Ndi, 2018). Finally, **Training and Education:** Religious leaders can provide training and education for their congregations on peace and conflict resolution. This can be done through sermons, workshops, seminars, and other platforms. This would increase the reach of peacebuilding initiatives, inspire leaders and congregations and help in building community-led peace initiatives

Women groups

Women groups can make a significant contribution to peacebuilding in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon. Firstly, **Advocacy for Women Inclusion:** Women groups can advocate for the inclusion of women in peacebuilding processes. This work can include promoting women's representation in decision-making structures, advocating for gender-sensitive peace frameworks and policies, and raising awareness about specific gendered effects of the conflict on women and girls. This work can pave the way for better outcomes of peace processes which take into account the needs of women and other marginalized groups (Woen, 2020). **Dialogue and Mediation:** Women groups can facilitate dialogue and mediate disputes. They can hold inter- and intra-community dialogues that would enable women from

different backgrounds to share their insights and experiences, and develop common strategies for preventing and resolving conflicts. They can open up channels for communication that focus on peaceful coexistence, conveying alternative narratives as well as reducing misperceptions and misunderstandings. Also, Humanitarian and Psychosocial Support: Women groups can provide humanitarian and psychosocial support to those affected by the conflict. They can educate women and girls about their rights and ensure that their needs are met. Women groups can provide safe spaces for victims and survivors of violence to receive trauma-sensitive care and support, as well as empowering women through various income-generating activities. Lastly, Community-Based Initiatives: Women groups can initiate community-based peace initiatives that create connections and promote interdependence between communities. These may include initiatives that encourage community values, inter-group initiatives that foster solidarity, and initiatives aimed at mitigating xenophobia and polarisation.

Youths

Youths form a greater part of the society and they can play a pivotal role. Firstly Dialogue and Social Cohesion, Youths can promote dialogue and social cohesion by facilitating meetings between different linguistic, religious, and cultural groups. They can also establish safe spaces where people can express their perspectives and work towards democratic solutions to conflicts (Zintl, 2019). Such dialogues have the potential to address and mitigate the effects of polarization, violence, and division within communities and reduce the negative impacts of the crisis on young people. Further, Sports and Cultural Activities: Youths can engage in sports and cultural activities that promote peace and reconciliation between communities. Such activities create opportunities for youths from different communities to come together and promote social cohesion. These activities have the potential to forge

strong bonds and break down barriers between communities. Education: Youths can promote peace and reconciliation through education. They can develop curricula for schools that promote peaceful co-existence, tolerance, and conflict resolution skills. They can also organize seminars and trainings for youths on effective conflict resolution methods, including techniques around mediation and negotiation (Aondo, 2020). Finally, Advocacy: Youths can advocate for peace and reconciliation through various means. They can use social media to raise awareness about the effects of violence and the need for peaceful resolution. Youths can also use their voices to put pressure on political leaders to prioritize and adopt peaceful solutions to the conflict.

Quarter Heads

Quarter heads, who are local government officials and community leaders who preside over neighborhoods, can play a significant role in building peace in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon through Advocacy. Quarter heads can use their positions to advocate for peace and non-violent solutions to conflicts. They can engage with stakeholders, including religious leaders, traditional rulers, and local authorities to find common ground and influence positive outcomes (Brown, 2018). Also, Quarter heads can mobilize youth and community members towards peacebuilding initiatives. They can foster inter-group cooperation and exchange that will break down stereotypes, reduce tensions, and build a foundation for sustainable peace (Woen, 2020). Lastly, Monitoring and Evaluation: Quarter heads can support peacebuilding initiatives by providing information that enables efficient monitoring and evaluation of programs and activities aimed at promoting stability and

development in the regions. This information can help to tailor interventions to the needs of the communities and mitigate any adverse effects.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our findings suggest that community engagement is crucial in building sustainable peace in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon. We recommend the development of peace education programs, the promotion of intercultural dialogue and the inclusion of women and youth in peace building efforts.

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