Exploring the Intercommunal Conflict Mitigation Strategies: The Case of the Pokomo and the Orma in Tana Delta, Kenya

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Abstract
Intercommunal conflict is a challenge to social, economic and political development in Kenya. The Tana Delta region has been experiencing conflicts over the years despite the efforts put in place by various stakeholders in peace building and conflict management among the Pokomo and Orma communities. Hence the need to evaluate the effectiveness of the various approaches employed in conflict management and peace building in the region such as the customary approach, hard power approach, NGOs empowerment model and the community-based approach. This article explores the various strategies employed by stakeholders and peace actors in attaining sustainable peace in Tana Delta, Tana River County, Kenya. The objective of the article is to examine the conflict mitigation strategies used in Tana Delta and assess their effectiveness in peacebuilding and conflict management. It attempts to answer the question, 'how effective are the tools of conflict management employed in the mitigation of the perennial conflict in Tana Delta region?' The article uses the Conflict Theory as developed and applied by Dahrendorf (1959) and Bartos and Wehr (2002). It relies on data collected through qualitative research design comprising of In-depth interviews and FGDs conducted on 83 respondents. The article argues that the most sustainable approach in managing intercommunity conflict was the community-based approach through the development of peace committees followed by hard power approach through the deployment of security forces, then the NGOs empowerment model and the customary approach. Sustainable peace is best achieved through an integrated approach that combines traditional, security, and developmental strategies tailored to local contexts. The study concludes that, the success of such approaches depends on contextual factors, community participation, and the integration of cultural practices, all of which are vital for addressing conflicts in areas like the Tana Delta and beyond.

Keywords: Conflict, Intercommunal, Peacebuilding, Mitigation, Peace Actors, Tana Delta

1.0 Introduction

Intercommunal conflict statistics show a rising global trend of such violence, with the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) noting that 88% of communal conflict deaths in 2007–2023 occurred in civil war-affected countries, a stark increase from the 49% observed in 1989–2006. (Wiehler & van Baalen, 2024). Sudan, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, (DRC), and Myanmar among others experienced perennial communal conflicts, often linked to resource competition and historical grievances, impacting human security and displacing thousands (Wiehler & van Baalen, 2024; Davies & Others, 2025).

Africa experienced many protracted conflicts after the end of the Cold War Era. These conflicts had devastating impact on civilian populations and development initiatives. Many of these conflicts have led to terrible armed conflicts (Musembi and Iteyo, 2018, p.4-7). According to Deng (2005, p. 3), 20% of sub-Saharan population lives in countries that are at war within themselves. As a result of poor leadership and harsh climatic conditions, Africa reports more battle-related deaths than the rest of the world. According to UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2024), Chad recorded a total of 51cases of inter/intra-community conflicts in the year 2023 alone. The Inter-communal conflicts reported were related to conflicts between farmers and herders, land conflicts and intra-communal conflicts related to traditional chiefdom. This resulted in the displacement of some women and children within the country and into neighboring Cameroon.

According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), communal conflicts kill thousands of people each year and leave massive destruction in their wake. Inter-communal violence in Mali in 2018, for instance, killed over 200 civilians in the Mopti region alone. In addition, the violence drove thousands from their homes and caused widespread hunger (Wiehler & van Baalen, 2024). Consequently, countries that have been embroiled in violent conflict in sub-Saharan Africa are characterized by abject poverty, inadequate service provision, political instability, retarded economic growth and other challenges to overall development (Musembi, 2018, p. 73942). The impact of Intercommunal conflict has been experienced in both governance and humanitarian aspects. According to Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) several factors have contributed and accelerated intercommunal conflicts which include poor management of natural resources, lack of inclusive governance, marginalization and leadership disputes. The humanitarian impact of intercommunal conflict cannot be underestimated. These conflicts lead to mass displacement, disruption of education and healthcare services, and increased operating risks for non-local staff, especially in conflict-affected areas (Wiehler & van Baalen, 2024). The Horn of Africa, East Africa and Kenya at large face the same related challenges.

Intercommunal conflict is a challenge to social, economic and political development in Kenya. The Tana Delta region has been experiencing conflicts over the years despite the efforts put in place by various stakeholders in peace building and conflict transformation among the Pokomo

and Orma communities. Musembi and Iteyo (2018) noted that a number of strategies have been employed in response to the conflict and peace building in the Tana Delta. However, despite the various approaches and initiatives towards peace, this region has experienced reoccurrence of conflict. What could have been the challenge? Have the approaches employed in conflict management failed? This article therefore intends to examine the conflict mitigation strategies used in Tana Delta, and assess their effectiveness in peacebuilding and conflict management.

2.0 Integrated Approaches to Peace Intervention

This article discussed the various strategies employed by stakeholders and peace actors in peacebuilding and conflict management in Tana Delta. Therefore, various strategies were examined as discussed below.

2.1 African Traditional Conflict Management: Customary Approach

Chapman & Kagaha (2009) explain that locally facilitated conflict settlement procedures play an essential role in how communal conflicts are solved in Africa and more basically in pastoral lands in Africa such as the Horn of Africa. Elite councils, with reference to customary laws, have made use of traditional law in the past to play at the center of dispute settlement and mediation. As Martin (2012), Mbugua (2013), and Musembi (2018) attest, communities like Pokomo, Orma and Wardei had historically depended on such councils as Gasa and Matadeda to deal with conflicts over resources and preserve communal peace using mechanisms such as mediation and reconciliation.

Kirchner (2013) observes that colonialism was effective though the indigenous systems worked. Nevertheless, the authority of the traditional elders was undermined by the arrival of migrant pastoralists that failed to respect local customs, as well as impacts of youth that were educated and political forces beyond the community (Musembi, 2018). Moreover, conflict has become more complex due to the expanding share of small arms and light weapons, which reduced the efficiency of local mechanisms (NGEC, 2013; Musembi, 2018).

According to Martin (2007) and Elfversson (2019), who observed that where the parties were involved in intercommunal conflict have common traditions, the customary mechanisms are the most effective. Nonetheless, cultural differences between the Pokomo and Orma in Tana Delta are so broad that it has compromised efforts to resolve conflicts. But that notwithstanding, cooperation between elders in history worked out successfully, as is evident with the Witu Convention of 2009 (Pickmeier, 2012; Mbugua, 2013). Although the cultural distance makes peacemaking more

complicated (Elfversson, 2019), the common livelihoods and a prolonged coexistence indicate that conventional reconciliation systems, particularly the ones accepted in formality and involving women, could still possess a substantial impact in terms of conflict management (Mbugua, 2013; Elfversson, 2019). Therefore, the recognition of the local social capital for peace building is vital for local ownership of the peace building process. Mbugua (2013) and Elfversson (2019) avers that, these communities co-existed for a long time during which there were periods of peace and harmony. It is evident therefore, that the traditional reconciliation mechanism can be given new impetus through formal recognition of traditional structures and the role of women in community reconciliation so that it can be an effective tool for conflict management.

2.2 Government's Response: Hard Power Approach

Musembi (2018), Mbugua (2013), and Martin (2012), reported that the government reacted to the conflict in Tana Delta by deploying over 2,000 General Service Unit (GSU) officers. Majority of the officers were not familiar with the local environment and did not have sufficient means of transport thus limiting their effectiveness. Disarming of communities was not so effective due to the local people concealing weapons in forests. Reports showed favoritism whereby disarmament was done on the Pokomo community only with the remaining populations being armed. Police were coming to the scenes of conflicts too late and were supposed to be respondents of certain attacks, which added to the community distrust (Dimanche, 2021). Other activities that affected the local confidence were human rights violations by the government security officers, who completely washed away the confidence of the residents, in the sense that they had to arm themselves to protect their lives and properties. There were arrests that occurred in the course of the conflict, but the suspects were quickly released and the peace initiatives were also brief (Kirchner, 2013). The government also formed a judicial commission of inquiry headed by Lady Justice Grace Nzioka whose findings have never been made public.

Musembi (2018) argues that the use of force (hard power approach) jeopardized and complicated the process of peace building by alienating the state from the local community and the conflict management process. In addition, the use of force lacked compassion; and was driven by the security forces who did not necessarily have the proficiency in community dynamics. Krätli & Swift (1999) and Kangethe (2008) stressed that the military action can trigger violence and abuse.

The process of communal conflict is usually complicated by state intervention instead of solving it. Therefore, in response to the above situation, Kangethe (2008) opined that;

> "Religious leaders are uniquely placed to deal with the societal challenges. This is because they have the capacity, moral authority and the courage to transform conflicts, promote peaceful co-existence among people, and care for those who are sick and in desperate situations. The fact that they operate at the grassroots level means they understand the fear and suffering of the local populations better than most government officials. They can, therefore, come up with better strategies and modalities to deal with those problems than any other institution. The network established by the religious leaders at the grassroots is sufficient if utilized well to address the encountered challenges and bring harmony and coexistence in the society" (p.29).

This is evident that in attempt to address the intercommunity conflict the government deployed the security forces whose intervention was significant. However, the use of security forces by the state was short lived hence ineffective in the management of the intercommunal conflict in Tana Delta.

2.3 Non-State Actors: NGO's Empowerment Model

Musembi (2018), Mbugua (2013), and Martin (2012), identify the contribution of different non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as, civil society organizations (CSOs), Community based organizations (CBOs), and Faith Based organizations (FBOs) like, CIPK, World Vision, KRCS, and Arid Lands Resource Management Program (with Oxfam), to deal with conflict in the Tana Delta. Some of the initiatives undertaken by these groups were solving the risks involved in the environment, fighting against land grabbing and advancing peace by the use of campaigns and interventions at the court. Their activities had limited effects since the locals did not feel interested in the processes. The meetings took place not in the areas of conflict which only increased distrust and the representatives chosen by NGOs were considered as slim proxies of the communities (Musembi, 2018).

Furthermore, Musembi (2018) also confirms that the NGOs had little influence at the grassroots level because of the inadequate knowledge of conflict management by the community and short-term and donor-driven peace initiatives such as sports events. Such initiatives usually focused on

behavioral approaches yet they did not address the structural issues underlying violence. The community sought the services of traditional Councils of Elders in solving conflicts, which meant that they required more profound locally-based solutions. According to Elfversson (2019), there is frequently more credibility in the eyes of the locals to non-state actors than the government when it comes to peacebuilding because there is a local mistrust of the state. An instance of non-state intervention that brings about success is the Kerio Valley peace process championed by the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission that translates into the Kolowa Declaration.

On the contrary, Krätli and Swift (1999) warn that by giving power to warlords, disproportionately altering powers, and inducing dependency through the provision of resources, international NGOs may accelerate and contribute to the conflict in an unintended manner. Nonetheless, they admit that external agencies continue to play very important roles in the provision of platforms through which dialogues and mediation are directly achieved during conflict resolution (Goldsmith, 1997; Krätli & Swift, 1999).

2.4 Community Based Approach

Muiya (2025) noted that the persistence of the intercommunal conflict in Tana delta has necessitated the emergence of community-based conflict resolution systems. Community based approach to conflict management involves local communities actively participating in resolving disputes and building peace. It is also known as Community- based conflict resolution (CBCR) method. This approach emphasizes local ownership, inclusivity, and addressing the root causes of conflict. The Pokomo and Orma communities have developed "mechanism aimed at resolving disputes and promoting sustainable peacebuilding" (Muiya, 2025, p. 303). The main approaches according to this study include peace committees, council of elders and involvement of non-governmental organizations.

The participation and engagement of peace committees and council of elders is critical in addressing the intercommunal conflict underscoring the relevance of culturally rooted mechanisms. The study demonstrated the importance of community-based approaches in managing and preventing intercommunal conflicts. This was one of the most effective approaches used by the local community and the government administrators towards peace in the intercommunal conflict.

Musembi & Iteyo (2018) viewed "community participation approach as an alternative approach of responding to intrastate conflicts which empowers individuals and local communities to take charge of their own development, peace and security agenda" (p.7). Therefore, it is appropriate and more effective while dealing with intractable conflicts including the perennial intercommunal conflict in Tana Delta region. The study underscores that community participation enhances the sociocultural and economic resources available in the community towards the management of conflict; it fosters community dialogue through mediation, reconciliation, and negotiations; and strategically links the bottom-up empowerment initiatives of the grassroots communities with the top-down protection initiatives of the state (p.4). Mukamba (2023) opined that it is prudent to rethink the community-based approach to be more holistic and considering the regions tangled conflict landscape in order to achieve a sustainable peace.

3.0 Research Methodology

This study employed the qualitative research design to collect, transcribe and analyze data from the field. The research design aims at gathering an in-depth understanding of human behavior and reasons that govern such behavior (Yates and Leggett, 2016, pp.222-231). In-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD's) were utilized in collecting primary data. In addition, secondary data acquired from different libraries (physical and virtual) and from the internet complimented the findings derived from original sources.

The study was conducted in Tana Delta Sub-County in Tana River County, situated on the north of Mombasa. Tana River County borders Kilifi County in the South, Lamu County in South East, Isiolo County in the North, Garissa County in the North East, and Kitui County in the West. The choice of this study area was as a result of the historical fact that Tana River County is one of the frontier counties in Kenya that has since independence in 1963 suffered from fragility, instability, socioeconomic marginalization, volatility, vulnerability, poverty and insecurity. The county also suffers from increasing frequency of disasters caused by natural and man-made hazards, and protracted conflicts. Politically driven conflicts have also affected Tana River County, with the county experiencing its worst violence in 2012/2013, where over 400 people were killed, villages burnt down and thousands of people displaced to the neighboring counties (Kenya Community Support Centre, 2021).

The study involved a total of 83 respondents, 51 were involved in the interview, while 32 participated in the four FGDs. The study applied purposive and snow balling techniques to select a sample that had vast knowledge on the research area and reduce the chances of bias. Four FGD's were conducted, composed of eight members drawn as follows; six adults (male and female) and two youth of both genders. In this regard, respondents were sampled as follows; Pokomo 30, Orma 30 and other communities 23, making a total number of 83 respondents. The respondents included: government administrators, security personnel, political leaders, non-governmental organizations, faith-based organizations and the local community including village elders and religious leaders. These are the institutional leaders involved in peace building and conflict management in this region.

The study utilized thematic analysis to identify common themes in the data. Dawadi (2020) defines thematic analysis as a qualitative research method used to organize and analyze complex sets of data in a systematic way. Data generated from interviews, FGDs and documentary review was presented in descriptive form. Braun & Clarke's (2013) six-steps framework for thematic data analysis was adopted for this article. Deductive data coding approach was utilized to analyze and interpret data. This involved a critical assessment of each response and examining it using thematic interpretations in accordance with the objective of the study in order to present the findings in narrative excerpts within the article.

4.0 Study Findings

The findings of the study are represented in the table below.

Peace mitigation approaches	Percentage	Description
Community based approach	67	Formation of local peace committees (barazas) to mediate and promote dialogue
Hard power approach	30	Increased security presence to prevent violence
NGOs' Empowerment model	15	Implementation of community development initiatives to foster cooperation

NGOs' empowerment- Peace Programs	17	Programs aimed at promoting understanding, tolerance, and reconciliation
CSO- Education and Awareness Campaigns	6	Programs to educate communities on peace, coexistence, and human rights

Table 1 Roles of peace actors in conflict mitigation in Tana Delta.

Based on the study findings indicated on table 1 above, the most sustainable approach in the management of intercommunity conflict was the community-based approach through the development of peace committees, which accounted for 67% of the efforts. This suggested that establishment of community-based peace committees was a key strategy employed by the government and local stakeholders to facilitate conflict resolution and promote peace. This was echoed by Caroline Maneno's response, "National government used to call meetings (baraza) every now and then. They would call people from outside this area from Nairobi, Mombasa and other places." Sheikh Abdulahi pointed that, "the government has a structure for peace from the village level, where there governed by the headman and the elders. There is a location peace committee, and regional peace committee. And then up to sub- county peace committee. They always usher peace and also bring people together." In addition, Mwanajuma Salim supported this assertion by her statement, "First of all, the government, through the chiefs and assistant chiefs had the barazas explaining to people on the importance of peace and importance of living together in unity." This clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of community participation approach in intercommunal conflict management.

The deployment of security forces (hard power approach), represent 30% of the measures implemented. This reflected a reliance on security forces to maintain order and prevent violence in the region. According to Jane Komora in FGD 4 observed that, "The police were all sent here when there was conflict." In yet another response from FGD 2 in Chara area, the role of the government by use of GSU played out during the conflict as observed by Ali Salim Bwana Ali, "The government set up curfew during the night to prevent insecurity. GSU were doing patrol at

night to promote security." To back this up, village elder Japhet Nkaduda reported that, "National government provided us with necessities, the properties that we use and even some allowances were sometimes given. They also sometimes provided security. We had the authority to utilize police vehicle and DCI." This is evident that in attempt to address the intercommunity conflict the government deployed the security forces whose intervention was significant. However, the use of force by the state was short lived hence not successful in the management of the intercommunal conflict in Tana Delta.

NGOs' Empowerment model, comprised 15% of the interventions as noted on table1. This highlights the role of NGOs in addressing structural and community development initiatives in order to deal with the underlying causes of conflict. According to Micah Maua, "The Kenya Red Cross Society (KRCS) came in time assisting in relief aid for the IDPs and the people who were spending their nights in schools. They ensured that vulnerable people, the most affected, and the victims have shelter, clothing and such kind of humanitarian assistance." Mwanajuma Salim added her voice in support of the role played by the NGOs, "Another thing that the organizations did when they came was creating awareness on peace and the biggest thing that made it possible was intermarriages. For example, let's say my sibling is married to the Ormas and the Pokomos plan to attack the Ormas I won't allow that to happen because we are connected,".

CBOs and FBOs peace programs accounted for 17%, (table1) indicating that peacebuilding activities such as dialogue sessions and reconciliation efforts were integral components of their approach. Education and awareness campaigns (advocacy and sensitization) constituted only a small percentage, at 6%, suggesting that while these campaigns played a role, they were less prioritized compared to other strategies. These findings illustrated a multifaceted approach to conflict management, with a strong emphasis on grassroots peace committees and a combination of security, development, and peace initiatives.

5.0 Discussion

This study revealed that the most sustainable approach in managing intercommunity conflict between the Pokomo and Orma in the Tana Delta region was the community-based approach through the development of peace committees, which accounted for the majority of intervention efforts. This aligns with broader peacebuilding literature emphasizing the importance of grassroots

initiatives (community-based approach) involving local leaders, especially village elders, in fostering sustainable peace. For example, Murang'ai (2022) examined community-led peace processes in Kenya's Rift Valley, where local peace committees played a central role in mediating disputes and rebuilding social trust after episodes of violence. Murang'ai study highlighted that these committees, often composed of traditional elders, served as culturally relevant platforms that leverage existing social authority and community participation. Similarly, Otte and Iteyo, (2023) underscored the effectiveness of community-based peace committees in the post-election violence mitigation in Kenya, noting that their success largely depended on local legitimacy and the integration of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. These findings reinforce the notion that empowering local elders and community members through peace committees can significantly reduce violence and promote harmony, especially in volatile regions like the Tana Delta.

Another noteworthy aspect of the study's results was the deployment of security forces, which constituted a considerable strategy. This hard power approach reflects a common pattern observed in conflict zones where state security agencies are mobilized to restore order temporarily. Similar to this study, Kelly (2020) analyzed Kenya's security-focused interventions during periods of political unrest and found that while deployment of security personnel can be effective in halting immediate violence, it does not address the underlying root causes. Kelly argued that security measures alone often fail to produce sustainable peace and may even escalate tensions if not complemented by community-based interventions. This is because the security personnel tend to be biased and use excessive force on one community hence escalating animosity. This perspective aligns with other research suggesting that security reinforcements should be viewed as short-term measures, whereas long-term peace relies on community engagement and development efforts, a point echoed in the findings of this study.

The study also highlighted the role of NGOs through the empowerment model which focused on development projects and peacebuilding programs. NGOs often engage in activities that go beyond immediate security concerns, focusing on addressing the socio-economic determinants of conflict such as poverty, illiteracy, marginalization, and lack of access to resources. Mugi (2020) documented similar patterns in Somalia where NGOs implemented economic and social development projects that fostered intercommunity cooperation and provided alternatives to

violence. Mugi noted that NGOs' peacebuilding programs, such as joint cultural festivals, dialogue sessions, and reconciliation workshops, contributed to building trust among conflicting groups. These efforts are crucial because they address the deeper structural issues that underlie recurrent conflicts. This point was emphasized by Agyemang (2023), who argued that sustainable conflict resolution requires multi-faceted approaches integrating development, dialogue, and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms.

Furthermore, the relatively low emphasis on education and awareness campaigns, as indicated in the study, mirrors findings from other conflict-prone regions, where awareness campaigns are often considered as a supportive strategy rather than a primary conflict management tool. Abdi and Mwangi (2023) pointed out that while educational initiatives can alter perceptions and promote peaceful coexistence, their impact is usually amplified when combined with community-based peace initiatives and economic development programs. They stressed that awareness campaigns are most effective when they are culturally sensitive and involve active participation of local communities, especially traditional leaders and elders.

It is evident therefore, that this study resonates with other research highlighting the centrality of grassroots peace committees, the adjunct role of security forces, and the importance of development programs spearheaded by NGOs in conflict management. The emphasis on community-based peace committees underscores the effectiveness of leveraging local authority structures, particularly elders, in conflict resolution. Meanwhile, the deployment of police and military forces acts as a short-term stabilizer, whereas NGO-led development projects and peace programs address root causes of conflict, fostering long-term stability. These findings reinforce the consensus that sustainable peace is best achieved through an integrated approach that combines traditional, security, and developmental strategies tailored to local contexts. The success of such approaches depends on contextual factors, community participation, and the integration of cultural practices, all of which are vital for addressing conflicts in areas like the Tana Delta and beyond.

6.0 Recommendations

The study recommends the systematic establishment and empowerment of local peace committees. Such committees can act in becoming critical avenues of conflict mediation, dialogue as well as community-driven peacebuilding programs, providing ownership of peacebuilding processes at a local level.

Security reinforcements should be viewed as short-term measures to quell violence. The government should engage the local community and development partners in addressing structural and community development initiatives in order to deal with the underlying causes of conflict. In addition, collaboration with non-governmental organization, community-based organization and civil society organizations is critical in attaining sustainable peace. Partnering with organizations that focus on peacebuilding and conflict management will provide additional resources and expertise which is critical towards sustainable peace.

It is recommended that local religious stakeholders be engaged in order to create avenue for dialogue towards peace and social cohesion. Moreover, in order to broaden support and participation community stakeholders should be involved by instituting activities that enhance community cohesion and solidarity. These local community groups include CSO, CBO, Youth empowerment groups and the village elders. These are crucial stakeholders at the grass roots.
And lastly, put in place systems for monitoring of early warning signs and reporting to facilitate the taking of prompt actions.

7.0 Conclusion

This paper has examined the strategies used by stakeholders in peace mitigation in Tana Delta. The government played a central role in beefing up security through deployment of security forces which was a short-term solution to the perennial conflict in the region. The establishment of peace committees and forums (baraza) for peace was effective in creating forums for dialogue towards peace in the local community. NGOs empowerment model programs based in helping alleviate underlying causes of conflict like lack of resources, illiteracy, and empowerment which enabled peaceful coexistence. However, the customary approach through the council of elders encountered many challenges and could not deliver the expectations of the local community. This was mainly due to the interference from the local politicians and ethnicity. As a result of their cooperation, the various actors increased people's awareness of peace and tolerance, dealt with disputes at the community level, and brought down the number of violent events. These initiatives were able to improve their relationships and helped to maintain harmony.

In conclusion, the strategies demonstrated the need for cooperation from various stakeholders in solving conflicts. It was found that by empowering neglected groups, encouraging discussions,

and unity among people, it becomes possible to turn conflict-torn areas into places of peace and joyful coexistence. The approaches above however, did not provide a lasting solution for peace in the Tana Delta. The prevailing traditional peace building mechanism should be given space in the formal peace committees to enhance effectiveness of interventions.

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