

Exploring Interreligious Dialogue as an Alternative Dispute Resolution Mechanism: The Case of Tana Delta, Kenya

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Abstract

This study examines the role of interreligious dialogue (IRD) as an alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanism in mitigating intercommunal conflict in the Tana Delta region of Kenya. Drawing on qualitative data collected from 83 respondents through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), the research explores how IRD contributes to peacebuilding between the Pokomo (predominantly Christian farmers) and Orma (predominantly Muslim pastoralists) communities. Grounded in John Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis, the study argues that IRD fosters mutual recognition, reduces religious exclusivism, and enables collaborative conflict resolution. Thematic analysis using NVivo identifies key contributions of IRD, including trust-building, mediation, and community cohesion, while also highlighting persistent challenges such as ethnicity, language barriers, illiteracy and historical grievances. The study contributes to African peacebuilding scholarship by demonstrating that IRD functions as a culturally embedded and community-driven ADR mechanism. It further aligns with global and continental development frameworks, including SDG 16 and AU Agenda 2063. The article concludes with actionable recommendations for institutionalizing IRD within local governance and peace infrastructures.

Keywords: *Interreligious Dialogue, Conflict Resolution, Tana Delta, Peacebuilding, ADR*

1.0 Introduction

Intercommunal conflicts in Africa are often complex, involving overlapping ethnic, economic, political, and religious dimensions. In Kenya’s Tana Delta, recurrent violence between the Pokomo and Orma communities has been linked to competition over land and water resources, compounded by political manipulation and identity-based tensions. These conflicts are not merely episodic outbreaks of violence but are embedded within deeper structural inequalities, historical grievances, and contested access to natural resources, particularly in ecologically fragile regions such as the Tana Delta. As scholars of African conflict have noted, resource-based conflicts are frequently intertwined with identity politics, where ethnicity and religion become mobilizing tools for both local actors and political elites (Boone 2014; Klopp & Sang 2011).

While formal state mechanisms of dispute resolution exist, they often lack cultural legitimacy and community trust. “Faith-based, faith-inspired, indigenous religions, and other faith actors, play an important role in many societies as key stakeholders in communities where they are often trusted

more by individuals than secular government actors in conflict and peacebuilding” (Moberg, 2009, p. 4). Shannahan & Payne (2016), avers that:

“Religion has influenced the theory and practice of peacebuilding at a fundamental level. Today faith-based actors are regularly engaged in efforts to resolve conflict. At their best, they have the moral capital, grassroots networks, functioning institutional frameworks and open-ended commitment to provide a local response to local problems” (p. 5).

Furthermore, Shannahan & Payne observed that “faith-based forms of conflict prevention place a strong emphasis on developing resilient relationships that can withstand conflict triggers, rather than tactical or technological measures to avoid outbreaks of violence. This relational dimension could strengthen existing conflict prevention approaches” (2016, p. 6).

In many African contexts, including Kenya, state-centric legal frameworks are frequently perceived as distant, bureaucratic, and insufficiently responsive to the lived realities of local communities. This limitation has led to increased scholarly and policy interest in alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms that are embedded within local socio-cultural systems (Murithi 2009). Such mechanisms often draw upon indigenous knowledge systems, communal values, and religious traditions, which are perceived as more accessible, legitimate, and effective in fostering sustainable peace (Chitando & Manyonganise 2011).

In this context, interreligious dialogue (IRD) has emerged as a locally grounded mechanism for fostering peaceful coexistence. IRD is increasingly recognized not only as a theological engagement between faith traditions but also as a practical peacebuilding tool that facilitates communication, trust-building, and conflict transformation (Abu-Nimer 2001; Lederach 1997). Within the African context, where religion plays a central role in shaping moral values, social relationships, and community leadership structures, IRD provides a culturally resonant platform through which conflicting groups can engage constructively. Empirical studies across sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate that religious leaders often act as mediators, peace advocates, and moral authorities capable of de-escalating tensions and fostering reconciliation (Haynes 2007; Appleby 2000).

Religious leaders and institutions in the Tana Delta have increasingly played a central role in mediating tensions, mobilizing communities, and promoting reconciliation. Their involvement is

particularly significant given the high levels of trust they command within their respective communities, often surpassing that accorded to political actors or state institutions. As a result, IRD initiatives in such contexts operate not merely as supplementary interventions but as primary mechanisms of conflict mitigation. This aligns with emerging scholarship in practical theology and religion-and-development studies, which underscores the importance of faith-based actors in addressing social fragmentation and violence (Magezi 2020; Kgatle 2021).

This study explores how IRD functions as an alternative dispute resolution mechanism in the Tana Delta. By focusing on a specific case study involving the Pokomo (predominantly Christian farmers) and Orma (predominantly Muslim pastoralists), the research contributes to a growing body of literature that seeks to understand how localized, faith-based interventions can address complex intercommunal conflicts. Unlike many existing studies that remain largely theoretical, this research is grounded in empirical data drawn from community members directly involved in or affected by these conflicts, thereby offering contextually rich insights into the dynamics of interreligious engagement.

The study argues that IRD is not merely a symbolic engagement between faith traditions but a practical and transformative tool for conflict mitigation rooted in shared moral values and communal relationships. In doing so, it advances the argument that interreligious dialogue constitutes a form of socially embedded ADR that complements formal legal systems while addressing their limitations. Furthermore, the study situates IRD within broader global and continental frameworks for peace and development, particularly those advanced by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goal 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions, and the African Union Agenda 2063, which envisions a peaceful and secure Africa grounded in inclusive and participatory governance.

Ultimately, this study contributes to African multidisciplinary scholarship by demonstrating that sustainable peacebuilding in contexts such as the Tana Delta requires approaches that are not only structurally informed but also culturally embedded, relationally grounded, and ethically driven. By foregrounding the role of interreligious dialogue, the article offers both a conceptual and practical framework for rethinking dispute resolution in Africa beyond the confines of formal state mechanisms, thereby opening new avenues for research, policy engagement, and community praxis.

2.0 Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the role of interreligious dialogue (IRD) as an alternative dispute resolution mechanism in the Tana Delta region of Kenya. The qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for this study because it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of intercommunal conflict and peacebuilding processes. In line with interpretivist research traditions, the study seeks to understand social reality as constructed through human interaction, meaning-making, and context-specific experiences (Creswell & Poth 2018). This methodological orientation is especially relevant in examining IRD, which is inherently relational, dialogical, and embedded in cultural and religious contexts.

The study is grounded within an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge is generated through interaction between the researcher and participants. This paradigm enables the researcher to capture the nuanced ways in which members of the Pokomo and Orma communities understand conflict, religion, and dialogue. It also allows for the incorporation of multiple perspectives, thereby providing a holistic understanding of the dynamics of interreligious engagement in the Tana Delta.

A total of 83 respondents were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants with relevant knowledge and experience in interreligious dialogue and conflict resolution, including religious leaders, community elders, youth representatives, women leaders, Persons with Disability (PWDs) and local administrators. Snowball sampling complemented this approach by enabling the researcher to reach additional participants through referrals, particularly in contexts where trust and community networks are essential for access. This combination of sampling strategies enhances the depth and richness of the data while ensuring that key stakeholder perspectives are adequately represented (Patton 2015).

Among the respondents, 51 took part in the interview, while 32 participated in the four FGDs. Cohen et al. (2013) avers that there is no defined sample size for any given study. However, the purpose of the study and the nature of population under study will influence or determine the correct sample size. The sample therefore provides insights into the broader population while saving time and resources.

The demographic composition of respondents was intentionally diverse to reflect the social complexity of the Tana Delta. Participants were drawn from both the Pokomo (predominantly Christian) and Orma (predominantly Muslim) communities, with attention to gender balance, age variation, and community roles. Such diversity is critical in qualitative research, as it allows for the exploration of both convergent and divergent perspectives on interreligious dialogue and conflict dynamics. It also strengthens the credibility and transferability of the findings by ensuring that multiple voices are included in the analysis.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). A total of four FGDs were conducted, each comprising of eight participants. The FGDs were organized along demographic and community lines to create safe spaces for open and honest dialogue, particularly in a context where intercommunal tensions may inhibit free expression.

The use of multiple data collection methods enabled methodological triangulation, which enhances the reliability and validity of qualitative research findings (Denzin 2012). By combining individual interviews with group discussions, the study captures both personal narratives and collective discourses, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the role of IRD in conflict mitigation.

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo version 14, a qualitative data analysis software that facilitates systematic coding and organization of large data sets. The analysis followed a thematic approach and an audit trail was maintained throughout the analysis process to ensure transparency, consistency, and methodological rigor. These practices enhanced the trustworthiness of the study in alignment with established criteria for qualitative rigor, including credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba 1985).

Ethical approvals were obtained from NACOSTI and Pwani University Ethics Review committee, and all participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Given the sensitive nature of intercommunal conflict, particular care was taken to ensure that participation did not expose individuals to risk or exacerbate existing tensions.

The study was conducted in Tana Delta, Tana River County, in the larger coastal region of Kenya. Historically, 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 region also experienced frequent disasters caused by natural and man-made hazards, and protracted conflicts. In addition, 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. Therefore, this became the ideal place for the study.

According to the KNBS (2019, p. 12) Tana delta is home to a population of about 110,640 people and covers 35,375.8 Square Kilometers. The population density is estimated at 7 per sq Km and an average household size of 4.6 according to the statistics (KNBS, 2019).

The study was limited by the research topic, methods and the specific objectives. Therefore, Tana Delta Sub-County was selected among the three sub-counties for this study. This was due to vast geographical area with under developed and poor infrastructure in Tana River County. Lastly the study was limited to thematic analysis as a method of qualitative study intended to unpack the social life of the communities in study in order to address the research objectives. However, despite the limitations stated above the objectives of the study were realized.

3.0 Discussion

3.1. Interreligious Dialogue: A Local Solution to Sustainable Peace

According to Chidongo (2010, p. 17), Interreligious dialogue refers to “an honest and practical way of discussion that can educate each party in order to reach a mutual understanding of each world-view, resulting in the development of respect, appreciation, tolerance and cooperation towards corporately working on issues affecting every individual”. The phrase 'interfaith dialogue' is used exchangeable with that of 'interreligious dialogue' in this study. Interreligious dialogue aims at promoting consensus and increasing forbearance and accommodating. When employed as a tool or strategic practice, interfaith dialogue may facilitate discussions to combat intolerance, hate speech and discrimination, and promote peacebuilding. Interreligious dialogue has the potential to create spaces for promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law in diverse and multicultural environments.

Singh (1999) defined Interfaith Dialogue as “the positive and cooperative interaction between people of different religions, faiths or spiritual beliefs, with the aim of promoting understanding between different religions to increase acceptance and tolerance”. Moreover, Interreligious

dialogue, “is about people of different religious identities seeking and coming to mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences” (Abu-Nimer, Alabbadi and Marquez, 2018, p.126). Shehu (2014) noted that inter-religious dialogue (IRD) “activities initiated by both religious actors and stakeholders have depicted clearly that religion stands for peace and not war”.

Inter-religious dialogue therefore is perceived “by many contemporary scholars and clergies of different religions namely Hans Küng, Leonard Swidler, John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, etc., as the most important means to bring humanity out from the contemporary intellectual and economic crises, social ills, intra- religious and inter-religious conflicts” (Shehu, 2014 p. 60). According to Abu-Nimer, Alabbadi, & Marquez, (2018, p.58), “there are three types of peacebuilding approaches, all of which are necessary for a successful transformation into a peace system: Political peacebuilding (agreements), structural peacebuilding (activities) and social peacebuilding (relationships)”.

Interreligious dialogue mainly focuses on building the social bonds and relationships which in turn creates an atmosphere conducive for harmonious coexistence and development. Interreligious dialogue for peacebuilding is an “important approach that places the practice of dialogue at the heart of peacebuilding. It fosters the (re)building of trust relations and enhances social cohesion. It increases awareness about how to improve human interactions” (Shehu, 2014, p. 61). The paradigm of interreligious dialogue is to provide people with a better understanding of religion and its teachings and should shift their views from hostility and enmity to mutual respect and better understanding. He goes further to say that, “the futuristic world peace between fellow men of different socio-economic-cultural-religious backgrounds depends on their genuine willingness to read, know and understand of one another ‘s traditions, cultures, and religions” (Shehu, 2014, p. 60).

Intercommunal peace can be promoted and sustained by the rejection of exclusivism and the promotion of inclusivism. As indicated earlier exclusivism led to hostility, violence, hatred, while inclusivism will create a climate of friendly relationship where mutual respect and better understanding shall prevail (Shehu, 2014 p. 62). Therefore, in order to build peace between people, inter-religious dialogue rejects exclusivism or isolation to one’s own worldview and promotes inclusiveness or openness not in the sense that a participant of inter-religious dialogue has to

embrace other's religion, tradition or culture. Rather, he/she has to maintain and enhance his/her own identity, while engaging with others (Ibid, p. 63). This is in agreement with John Hick pluralistic hypothesis. Hick opined that the world is religiously ambiguous, such that it can be experienced either religiously or non-religiously, with no compelling proofs for or against any one religious or nonreligious interpretation of the world.

It should be noted that traditions, cultures, and religions are critical in dialogue for peace. Peacebuilding can be a reality when dialogue is applied to different aspects of people's life. Shehu (2014, p.73), opined that "the contemporary peacebuilding paradigm of interreligious dialogue can be achieved with the sincere cooperation between religious leaders and government representatives". This is clearly demonstrated by the situation in Tana Delta where cooperation between religious leaders and the government has been embraced.

2. Genesis and Background of IRD in Tana Delta

According to CICC Trust (2015, p. 1) Interreligious dialogue activities in the coast region started after 1997, as a response to the emergence of political violence and extremism, and further accelerated by the tragic events of September 11, 2001(9/11) terror attack on the World Trade Center twin tower in the United States, which heightened tensions between Christians and Muslims at the Kenyan Coast. This approach was intended at bringing religious tolerance and coexistence and addressing the issue of radicalization. According to CICC strategic plan 2016-2021 (2015, p. 7), "CICC through its interreligious dialogue intervened to prevent and/or manage violent conflicts in places such as Mombasa, Tana River, Kaya Bombo in Kwale, Gongoni and Chakama in Kilifi and Garissa Counties".

Elfvorsson (2019, p 24), indicated that dialogue in Tana Delta was initiated by Council of Imans and Preachers of Kenya (CIPK), whereby a ceasefire was realized in July 2001. The ceasefire did not hold due to "religious cleavages that might have affected the mediator's role and their legitimacy. Despite of the major interfaith efforts, they were still unable to overcome tensions and distrust" (Ibid, p. 32).

During 2001, a number of NGOs and international organizations tried to mediate in the conflict. However, these organizations targeted the Pokomo more as their settlements were more accessible (and many of the relevant organizations were Christian FBOs). Such one-sided approach excluded the Muslims and exacerbated the conflict. To be able to bridge these gaps, Christian and Muslim

leaders initiated interreligious dialogue. First, high-level religious leaders came together, to address the religious dynamics, then they carried out interventions in specific locations (Pokomo Pastor OI, 25-06-2025). It is evident therefore that IRD has been utilized in Tana Delta region as an alternative mechanism in addressing the perennial intercommunal conflict. Various models of IRD have been employed in the region over the time to address the intercommunal conflict.

3.0 Models of interreligious dialogue (IRD)

There are various models and approaches to interreligious dialogue (IRD). This article considered the four approaches as advanced by Shehu, (2014). First is the People's dialogue of life, which refers to the peaceful and respectful co-existence, including active participation in one another's lives, between people of different races, cultures and religions. This approach, focuses on daily interactions and shared experiences between people of different faiths living in a certain locality. The second approach is People's social dialogue, which is basically the cooperation between people of different races and cultures in socio-economic enterprises (Begić, 2024). This is also referred to as 'Dialogue of Action,' which involves joint efforts to address social issues and promote justice in the community. The third approach is People's spiritual dialogue, which is the exchange of religious experiences and practices by people of different cultures and religions (Amaludin et al., 2023). This Dialogue of Religious Experience mainly focuses on sharing personal spiritual journeys and encounters with the divine. The final approach is People's inter-religious engagement, where conversation and explanation by experts and students of different religions about the teachings and practices of their faiths takes place (Asogwa & Okeke, 2021). It is also referred to as Dialogue of Theological Exchange, where deeper engagement with religious doctrines, scriptures and theological perspectives takes place among the religious scholars.

4.0 Findings

4.0 Impact of Interreligious Dialogue in community integration in Tana Delta

The analysis of the qualitative data reveals that interreligious dialogue (IRD) plays a significant and multidimensional role in mitigating intercommunal conflict in the Tana Delta. The findings are organized into four interrelated thematic areas: (1) IRD as a trust-building mechanism, (2) IRD as a conflict de-escalation tool, (3) the central role of religious leaders, and (4) the challenges

constraining the effectiveness of IRD. These themes reflect both the strengths and limitations of IRD as a locally embedded alternative dispute resolution mechanism.

4.1 IRD as a trust-building mechanism

The findings demonstrate that IRD functions as a foundational mechanism for building trust between the Pokomo and Orma communities. Participants consistently highlighted that sustained engagement in dialogue processes reduces suspicion, dismantles stereotypes, and fosters a sense of shared identity. Trust is not constructed instantaneously but develops progressively through repeated interactions, mutual listening, and the recognition of shared concerns.

One participant Orma Elder expressed this transformation succinctly:

“When we sit together as Muslims and Christians, we begin to see each other as neighbours, not enemies.” (OI, 25-07-2024)

This finding resonates strongly with relational theories of peacebuilding, particularly those advanced by John Paul Lederach, who emphasizes that sustainable peace emerges from the rebuilding of relationships rather than merely the resolution of issues. In the Tana Delta, IRD provides a structured yet flexible platform through which communities can engage in dialogue that humanizes the “other” and fosters empathy, thereby laying the groundwork for long-term coexistence.

4.2 IRD as a conflict de-escalation tool

The study further reveals that IRD plays a proactive role in preventing the escalation of conflict. Dialogue platforms and religious leaders often intervene at early stages of tension, thereby reducing the likelihood of violent outbreaks. This early intervention function positions IRD as an informal but effective mechanism within broader community-based conflict management systems.

As one Pokomo elder noted:

“Before things get out of hand, the religious leaders call us together and remind us of peace.” (OI, 25-07-2024).

Another Orma woman remarked:

“Both the Christians and Muslims helped in peace building.” (OI, 26-7-2024).

An Orma elder noted that:

“The outcome is that now we are almost 15 years and we are in peace. There have been no clashes. People have started embracing each other and that’s a really big step.” (OI, 23-07-2024).

This finding aligns with scholarship on faith-based peacebuilding, which highlights the strategic role of religious actors in early warning and early response mechanisms (Appleby 2000; Abu-Nimer 2001). The immediacy and accessibility of IRD processes enable rapid responses to emerging tensions, in contrast to formal institutional mechanisms that may be slower or less responsive to local dynamics.

4.3 The Central Role of Religious Leaders

The results underscore the pivotal role played by religious leaders in facilitating interreligious dialogue and mediating conflicts. Participants consistently identified pastors and imams as trusted figures whose moral authority and social influence enable them to guide communities toward peaceful coexistence.

A Pokomo youth participant observed:

“People listen to their pastors and imams more than politicians.” (OI, 25-07-2024)

This perception reflects a broader sociological pattern within many African contexts, where religious leaders are regarded as custodians of moral values and community cohesion. Their involvement enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of IRD processes, as they are able to mobilize followers, frame conflicts in ethical terms, and promote reconciliation. This finding is supported by recent African scholarship emphasizing the role of faith-based actors in addressing social fragmentation and promoting ethical governance (Magezi 2020; Kgatle 2021).

An Orma human rights activist affirmed the role religious leaders played in finding peace in the region. He noted that,

“The Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics (CICC) were instrumental in bringing peace. They initiated conversation and dialogue between the religious leaders” (OI, 26-7-2024).

A Pokomo pastor commented:

“Currently it is in the people’s minds and we do not have to hold meeting but whenever conflict arises the people run to religious leaders” (OI, 26-7-2024).

Another Pokomo pastor remarked:

“Not to boast but it has been proven that without religious leaders in the matters of peace building in Tana River you won't succeed. Nowadays whenever an organization comes, they must involve religious leaders because people trust religious leaders.” (OI, 25-7-2024).

In addition, an Orman woman pointed that,

“I believe that in every matter, whether government-related or otherwise, a religious leader should always be included. When a religious leader is involved, justice is seen because they represent fairness” (OI, 25-7-2024).

She went further noting specific areas that religious leaders intervened successful during the conflict:

“People were killing each other in Ngao and Kipao during the 2013 post-election violence, but the conflict was resolved by those religious leaders through dialogue” (OI, 25-7-2024).

This was also echoed by another Orma woman living with disability that,

“The Imam and Pastors are highly respected, and if they work together there will be no conflicts” (OI, 26-7-2024).

This aligns with the understanding that religious leaders often hold moral authority and influence within their communities, making them pivotal agents of peace in conflict-prone areas. Their involvement in dialogue not only facilitates mutual understanding but also acts as a peacebuilding mechanism, reducing religious tensions that could potentially escalate into violence. The emphasis on religious leaders underscores their role as mediators who can bridge divides, promote reconciliation and foster environments of harmony.

These findings are in agreement with Rugar (2020), who examined the role of religious organizations in peacebuilding in sub-Saharan Africa. Rugar emphasized that interfaith dialogue among religious leaders often leads to the creation of peaceful coexistence, especially in areas with

historical tensions rooted in religious differences. The study highlights that religious leaders, through their influence and moral authority, can significantly de-escalate conflicts and promote peace, reinforcing the findings from Tana Delta that prioritize religious leadership as key actors in peace processes.

This discussion is in line with Hick's pluralistic hypothesis which explores the dynamics of constructive conversation and interaction between people of different religious and faith traditions. Hick's theory aims at fostering understanding, respect, and cooperation among diverse religious communities, often with the goal of promoting peace, tolerance, and social harmony. It is on the basis of these arguments that this theory helped the study in discussing compatibility and coexistence of people with different beliefs since no world religion stands out above the rest or being unique or superior to the other. In this regard then, interreligious dialogue can be the best platform for which intercommunal conflict can be managed.

However, not all studies are in full agreement with the predominantly positive role of interreligious dialogue. Some scholars argue that such dialogues, while beneficial, are not always sufficient to address the deeper structural causes of conflict or may sometimes be superficial. Chitondo et al (2024), who analyzed interfaith initiatives in volatile regions noted that while dialogues can foster temporary peace and understanding, they may not lead to sustainable peace if underlying issues such as socio-economic inequalities, political marginalization, or resource disputes are not simultaneously addressed. Chitondo et al suggested that the effectiveness of interreligious dialogue depends heavily on the broader socio-political context and the genuine commitment of all parties involved. The study warns that in some cases, religious leaders may also manipulate interfaith platforms for political gains, which could undermine genuine peace efforts and exacerbate tensions instead of alleviating them.

Thus, while the findings from Tana Delta emphasizing the role of religious leaders in peacebuilding align with Rugar's (2020) positive perspective on interfaith dialogue, they somewhat contrast with Chitondo et al' cautionary stance regarding the limitations of such dialogues. These differences emphasize the significance of not viewing interreligious dialogue solely as an instrument for management of conflict, but also recognizing its potential limitations. Sustainable peace requires addressing underlying structural issues and ensuring genuine engagement beyond superficial exchanges.

4.4 Challenges Constraining the Effectiveness of IRD.

Despite its strengths, the study identifies several challenges that constrain the effectiveness of interreligious dialogue. These include tribal differences/ ethnicity, language barriers, illiteracy, and hostility/mistrust as indicated in the table below.

Challenges	%	Description
Ethnicity	61	Ethnic and tribal distinctions contribute to mistrust, miscommunication, and resistance to interfaith cooperation.
Language barrier	34	Differences in language, particularly Kiswahili and English, create difficulties in mutual understanding and dialogue facilitation. Limited literacy levels hinder understanding, participation, and effective communication during dialogues.
Illiteracy	23	Low literacy levels among community members limit their ability to comprehend dialogue content, access information, and actively engage in discussions. This hampers the overall effectiveness of interreligious initiatives.
Hostility/Mistrust	12	Prevailing hostility and mistrust among communities and religious groups impede efforts toward dialogue, fostering suspicion and reluctance to collaborate.

Table1. Challenges faced in implementing interreligious dialogue (IRD).

The table above represent percentage values of each theme on the challenges over the total population. This means that 61% of the population alluded that tribal differences or ethnicity was a contributing factor to the conflict in Tana River while 39% disagreed.

This study highlighted several significant challenges affecting the implementation of interreligious dialogue in the Tana Delta region. The data revealed that tribal differences and ethnicity posed a substantial barrier, with 61% of respondents citing these factors as contributing to mistrust, miscommunication and resistance to interfaith initiatives (see table 1 above). Historical conflicts and cultural misunderstandings underpinned these tribal distinctions, which often fueled suspicion among communities. This challenge stems from longstanding ethnic tensions, historical grievances, and political competition between the two communities, which often manifest in mistrust and social fragmentation. These divisions obstruct collaborative efforts and deepen resistance to interfaith initiatives.

The persistent ethnic polarization undermines attempts at dialogue, as individuals tend to align more closely with their ethnic identities than shared religious or community interests. This limits the capacity of interreligious forums to build trust and mutual respect, core prerequisites for meaningful dialogue and reconciliation. According to Orma human rights activist:

“People were packed into tribes and bringing them together was a challenge, the conflict had left a big scar. You cannot bring people together in one forum, when an Orma learns that in a meeting he/she will be together with Pokomos, they decline to attend the meeting and vice versa. Some people would sometimes break into tears in a meeting because when we meet, you remind me of my family members that I lost due to the conflict with your community and on that note, he decides not to sit with these people” (OI, 25-7-2024).

Participants noted that political actors sometimes exploited ethnic and religious divisions for personal or electoral gain.

As one Pokomo youth remarked:

“Sometimes politicians divide us, even when we are trying to live in peace.” (OI, 26-7-2024).

These findings are consistent with broader analyses of African conflicts, which highlight the role of elite manipulation in exacerbating communal tensions (Boone 2014). Ndambuki (2022) avers that ethnic tensions and language diversity posed significant barriers to interreligious cooperation in conflict-prone areas of Kenya, including the Tana River region. Ndambuki emphasized the importance of addressing underlying ethnic animosities and promoting inclusive communication

strategies to enhance the effectiveness of dialogue. Similarly, Aboi (2024) highlighted how ethnic identity often overshadows religious identity in conflict situations. He argued that reconciliation and dialogue are most effective when rooted in local cultural understanding and when they directly confront tribal divisions and communication obstacles.

Language barriers also present a challenge, particularly in facilitating inclusive and effective dialogue. 34% of respondents noted that differences in language, particularly Kiswahili and English, created difficulties in mutual understanding and communication. Differences in language and cultural expression can hinder communication and limit participation, thereby affecting the overall effectiveness of IRD processes. Many community members lacked the ability to understand or process complex dialogue content, which hindered their active participation and engagement. This limitation often resulted in the exclusion of certain voices from discussions, weakening the overall impact of peacebuilding initiatives.

According to an Orma human rights activist:

“Language barrier has been a challenge because the illiteracy level is high, so when you want to engage experts from outside the county then it becomes a challenge” (OI, 25-7-2024).

Illiteracy emerged as another critical challenge, with 23% of participants highlighting that low literacy levels restricted their access to information and ability to follow complex dialogue processes. This often resulted in marginalized voices and reduced overall participation, thereby weakening the potential for meaningful interfaith cooperation. Low literacy levels restricted community members' ability to access information, comprehend the issues discussed, and contribute meaningfully to peace processes. The lack of literacy skills increased dependence on verbal communication, which could be compromised by language differences, further complicating efforts to foster consensus and mutual understanding. Without the capacity to comprehend written information or official documents, communities remain vulnerable to misconceptions and misinformation, which could escalate tensions or deepen mistrust.

An Orma Imam remarked:

“Our people are not educated as such. So, in all our programs as we promote peace, we must also tell our people to advance in education. Once, these people are well educated the issue of conflict will be gone.” (OI, 23-07-2024)

Hostility and mistrust also hindered dialogue efforts, with 12% of respondents indicating that existing hostility created an environment of suspicion, making it difficult to foster cooperation and open communication. This deep-seated mistrust was exacerbated by prior conflicts and negative perceptions, which further impeded efforts toward peaceful coexistence. Deep-seated hostility, fueled by previous conflicts and negative stereotypes, as well as historical grievances created an environment where communities were reluctant to open up or cooperate. This mistrust often led to a cycle of hostility, making peacebuilding processes slow and challenging. Such dynamics undermine trust and complicate peacebuilding efforts, even in contexts where IRD initiatives are active.

4.5 Integrative Interpretation of Findings

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that IRD operates as a socially embedded, relational, and culturally grounded mechanism of alternative dispute resolution. It addresses not only the immediate manifestations of conflict but also the deeper relational and ethical dimensions that underpin sustainable peace. While IRD is not a comprehensive solution to all forms of conflict, its capacity to foster trust, facilitate mediation, and strengthen community cohesion underscores its significance as a locally relevant peacebuilding strategy.

Moreover, the findings align with broader global and continental development frameworks, including those advanced by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals—particularly Goal 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions—and the African Union Agenda 2063, which emphasizes the vision of a peaceful and secure Africa. By demonstrating how IRD contributes to these objectives at the community level, the study highlights its relevance not only as a local intervention but also as part of a broader agenda for sustainable development and peace.

In summary, these findings underscore that tribal/ethnic divisions, linguistic barriers, illiteracy and historical mistrusts/hostilities significantly hindered interreligious dialogue in the Tana Delta. Addressing these barriers is essential for promoting mutual understanding and sustainable intercommunity harmony in the locality. A holistic approach, comprising of language and literacy

programs, reconciliation initiatives, and trust-building activities is crucial to address these barriers. Only by overcoming these obstacles can sustainable peace and harmonious coexistence be achieved in the region. It is evident that interfaith dialogue can be very instrumental as an alternative dispute resolution mechanism when thoughtfully designed and implemented. It is indeed a powerful approach to resolving communal conflicts since it builds understanding, addresses root causes and fosters lasting peace and social cohesion across diverse settings as depicted in this article.

5.0 Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that interreligious dialogue (IRD) plays a significant role in mitigating intercommunal conflict in the Tana Delta, thereby reinforcing its relevance as a locally grounded alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanism. The evidence generated from the qualitative data indicates that IRD operates not merely as an occasional intervention but as an ongoing relational process that fosters trust, promotes mutual understanding, and facilitates collective problem-solving among communities that have historically experienced tension and violence. In this regard, the study affirms the argument that sustainable peacebuilding in African contexts is most effective when it is embedded within culturally resonant and socially legitimate frameworks (Murithi 2009; Abu-Nimer 2001).

A key contribution of the findings is the demonstration that IRD functions as a trust-building mechanism, which is foundational to any meaningful conflict transformation process. Trust, as reflected in participants' narratives, emerges through repeated interaction, shared dialogue spaces, and the recognition of common humanity across religious divides. This aligns with the theoretical insights of John Paul Lederach (1997), who emphasizes the importance of relational approaches to conflict transformation, where rebuilding relationships is central to achieving long-term peace. In the Tana Delta context, IRD creates safe spaces where previously antagonistic groups can engage in constructive dialogue, thereby reducing suspicion and fostering coexistence.

Furthermore, the study highlights the role of IRD as a conflict de-escalation mechanism, particularly during periods of heightened tension. Religious leaders act as first responders in mediating disputes before they escalate into violence. This finding is consistent with broader scholarship on faith-based peacebuilding, which underscores the strategic role of religious actors in early warning and early response systems (Appleby 2000; Haynes 2007). The moral authority

and social legitimacy of religious leaders enable them to mobilize communities toward peace-oriented actions, often more effectively than formal state institutions. In this sense, IRD complements formal governance structures by providing a flexible, accessible, and culturally embedded mechanism for conflict management.

The centrality of religious leaders in IRD processes also reflects the broader sociological reality of African societies, where religion is deeply intertwined with identity, authority, and social organization. Participants' perceptions that religious leaders are more trustworthy than political actors point to a critical gap in state legitimacy and governance. This finding resonates with recent African theological scholarship, which emphasizes the role of faith communities in addressing social fragmentation and promoting ethical leadership (Magezi 2020; Kgatle 2021). Consequently, IRD should not be viewed as peripheral to governance but as an integral component of community-based peace infrastructures.

Importantly, the study provides empirical support for the application of John Hick's pluralistic hypothesis within the context of intercommunal conflict. Hick's proposition that diverse religious traditions represent different responses to a shared Ultimate Reality offers a philosophical foundation for interreligious engagement. In the Tana Delta, this theoretical perspective is reflected in the way participants acknowledge shared moral values—such as peace, justice, and compassion—across Christian and Muslim traditions. This recognition facilitates what Hick describes as a movement from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness, thereby enabling communities to transcend exclusivist tendencies and engage in collaborative problem-solving. The findings thus demonstrate that Hick's framework is not merely abstract but has practical applicability in real-world conflict settings.

However, the study also identifies significant challenges that limit the effectiveness of IRD, including political interference, language barriers, and deeply entrenched historical grievances. Political actors often exploit ethnic and religious identities for electoral gain, thereby undermining peace initiatives and exacerbating divisions. This finding is consistent with literature on the politicization of identity in African conflicts (Boone 2014), which highlights how elite manipulation can destabilize local peace processes. Addressing this challenge requires a more deliberate integration of IRD into formal governance structures, as well as stronger accountability mechanisms for political actors.

Language barriers present another critical obstacle, particularly in contexts where multiple ethnic groups coexist with distinct linguistic identities. Effective dialogue requires not only translation but also cultural interpretation to ensure that meaning is accurately conveyed and understood. This underscores the need for capacity-building initiatives that equip facilitators with multilingual and intercultural competencies.

The findings of this study also contribute to broader global and continental development agendas. By promoting peaceful coexistence, inclusive dialogue, and community-based conflict resolution, IRD directly advances the objectives of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 16, which emphasizes peace, justice, and strong institutions. Additionally, the study aligns with the aspirations of the African Union Agenda 2063, especially Aspiration 4, which envisions a peaceful and secure Africa. The emphasis on locally driven peacebuilding initiatives further resonates with Aspiration 6, which calls for people-centered development.

In synthesizing these findings, this study advances the argument that IRD should be understood as a form of socially embedded ADR that is uniquely suited to the African context. Unlike formal legal systems, which often operate at a distance from local realities, IRD is rooted in everyday social interactions, shared belief systems, and communal values. It therefore offers a more holistic approach to conflict resolution, addressing not only the immediate causes of conflict but also the relational and ethical dimensions that sustain peace over time.

Ultimately, the discussion underscores that while IRD is not a panacea for all forms of conflict, it represents a critical component of a multi-layered peacebuilding strategy. Its effectiveness depends on sustained engagement, institutional support, and integration with broader socio-political processes. Future research should explore how IRD can be scaled up and institutionalized within national peace architectures, as well as how it can be adapted to other conflict contexts across Africa.

6.0 Recommendations

Building on the empirical findings of this study, which demonstrate that interreligious dialogue (IRD) contributes significantly to trust-building, conflict de-escalation, and community cohesion in the Tana Delta, this section proposes a set of specific, actionable recommendations aimed at strengthening IRD as an alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanism. These

recommendations are directed towards community actors, religious institutions, and government stakeholders.

6.1 Government/Ministry of Education should prioritize adult literacy and mother-tongue-based dialogue facilitation in Tana Delta in order to address illiteracy and language barrier.

6.2 Religious institutions (FBOs-CICC, SUPKEM, CIPK) should institutionalize regular “Dialogue of Life” and “Dialogue of Action” forums with joint peace projects on resource sharing.

6.3 County Government/NGOs should train religious leaders as community ambassadors; integrate IRD into early-warning systems; address ethnic mistrust via joint trauma-healing sessions.

6.4 Multi-stakeholder to develop monitoring frameworks for IRD outcomes e.g., reduced incidents, increased trust metrics.

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