

Opinion

Ending war in Africa: The power of dialogue

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Africa has much to boast about these days. Crude clichés of a continent blighted by disease, poverty and bloodshed are steadily giving way to a far more promising narrative. In the face of a global economic slump, for instance, Africa keeps company with the world leaders in growth and investment. Meanwhile, democracy continues to spread – though admittedly, not without its setbacks.

Economic and political advancement doesn't happen in a vacuum. It requires stability - that pivotal ingredient whose absence held Africa back for so long. When there is good governance, there is less war, and positive things generally follow – development, justice, and prosperity. Usually, they move forward in unison. Conflict is the single biggest driver of extreme poverty in the world; containing it will position Africa to surge ahead rapidly.

At the core of Africa's rise is the fact that fewer and fewer deadly conflicts are being fought. A number of wars that were in full swing not long ago have been resolved, or stabilised: Angola, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and others. In Kenya, recent elections passed peacefully, and even in Somalia, where various ham-fisted international initiatives failed, an 'African way' – involving greater engagement by regional powers - is producing results.

But there is little room for complacency. Conflict could reignite in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, and elsewhere, threatening millions. The Sudans are still shaky, and tensions in north Africa could yet unwind the achievements of recent revolutions. An Islamist insurgency menaces Nigeria, and terrorist groups like Boko Haram, Al Qaeda and Al Shabaab threaten not only their immediate environs, but stability across the continent.

In general, though, conflict is on the decline. Why? Firstly, African governments, institutions and civil society have become better at preventing and resolving it. Spectacular international humanitarian failures during the 1990s in Rwanda and elsewhere prompted a new resolve to strengthen Africa's peace and security architecture, characterised by a more assertive African Union (AU), early warning systems, and other instruments that should be emulated elsewhere. Cooperation has improved between the AU, regional organisations and the UN, as evidenced by joint actions in Mali, Sudan and the DRC.

A crucial thread running through this peacemaking patchwork is mediation. Most wars these days end with negotiated settlements. 'Mediation' conjures up images of high-level statesmen - the likes of Kofi Annan and ex-Presidents Mandela, Obasanjo, and Mbeki - shuttling between Africa's trouble spots, weaving a magic spell of peace. But the mediation business today is much broader than that. Africa's regional bodies have enthusiastically adopted mediation as one of their principal peacemaking tools.

Less visibly, a group of 'private diplomats' also plays a pivotal role. Mediation organisations like the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD Centre) – which has engaged in numerous critical interventions, including in Libya, Sudan, Liberia and Kenya - work discreetly with conflict protagonists to help find paths to peace. In contrast to states and larger organisations, private mediators can deploy quickly, adjust creatively to changing circumstances and, through 'back-channels', reach out to the extremists, warlords, and armed groups with whom others cannot engage, but who can be so crucial to forging sustainable peace.

This week, prominent African mediators and peace process actors (alongside representatives of the AU and other regional organisations) will convene at the biennial Africa Mediators' Retreat in Zanzibar. Hosted by the HD Centre and the Nyerere Foundation, this year's edition will tackle contentious topics including the utility of force in peacemaking, the potential for dialogue with extremist groups in Somalia and the Great Lakes, 'African Solutions to African conflicts', and the impact of the International Criminal Court on peace efforts.

The great value of these retreats is the space they provide for critical reflection among peacemakers. We come together to share best practices, and learn from one another's successes and failures. Many pertinent lessons have emerged from these gatherings and improved mediation practice. One relates to the evolution of conflict drivers: modern day grievances relate not to territorial claims, but to unfulfilled democratic aspirations, economic mismanagement, and governance. Future conflicts will be triggered by competition for natural resources, the impacts of climate change, transnational crime, and the exploitation of governance vacuums by extremists.

To adjust to changing dynamics and respond to these complex challenges, mediators require skill, flexibility, and a diverse toolbox. Many things can go wrong, given the high-risk, high-stakes, and low-trust environment in which mediators operate. But despite its inherent uncertainties, mediation is often all that stands between peace and bloody carnage. Winston Churchill, no stranger to conflict, was one who recognised through harsh experience that 'to jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war'.

Any serious mediator will tell you that - no matter how gloomy the outlook - interests, conditions, and balances of power can shift suddenly, producing fleeting opportunities for dialogue. In preparing to seize that chance when it arrives, mediators will do well to study Africa and its vast experiences. A continent that has suffered so greatly, yet responded so innovatively to the cruellest, most intractable conflicts, has precious wisdom to share with the world's peacemakers. In conflict mediation, as in so many other international endeavours, 'Africa rising' deserves greater respect and attention.

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