Effectiveness of Peace Building from Below: Activities of local NGOs During Armed Conflict in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

The grassroots level or bottom-top peace building is getting more and more attention and is acknowledged as a crucial part in the peace building process, despite the official peace process commonly targets the top level. Peace agreements signed by the elite (top-bottom) will not be implemented thoroughly in society unless the population living the conflict has their own agency. These community-led agencies in the form of local NGOs play pivotal role in the effective implementation of peace building from below. This article seeks to examine the effectiveness of peace building activities from below carried out by local NGOs during armed conflict. Adopting the theory of subsidiarity in enhancing community-led peace building activities, this article employed the quantitative research approach with the use of questionnaire for data collection. The article targeted 107 respondents from Buea sub-division using purposive sampling technique in selecting the respondents who are well knowledgeable with regards to the peace building activities carried out by local NGOs. The findings reveal that NGOs have effectively implemented the following as peace building from below during armed conflict in communities; advocacy for peace, sensitization on no to drug abuse, sports and cultural activities, capacity building for youths, identifying the causes of the conflict, and protection of human rights as peace building from below activities. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are doing even more peace building activities than any official governmental agencies. In many of the areas of the world at large and in Cameroon in particular, they have a long term presence that is afflicted with intractable conflicts. NGOs are in an excellent position to engage in a wide variety of peace building activities from below.

Key words: Peace building from Below, Activities, local NGOs, armed conflict and Cameroon

INTRODUCTION

Lederach (1997: 20) opines that peace building is more than post-accord reconstruction. It is understood as a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict towards more sustainable, peaceful relationships. The term thus involves a wide range of activities that both precede and follow formal peace accords. Peace is seen not merely as a stage in time or a condition. It is a dynamic social construct.

Peace is a precondition for development and as such the role of Non-governmental organisations is designed to assist in the identification and address of root causes of insecurity, work to resolve conflict and identify solutions for lasting peace (Paffenholz, 2010: 55). Assisting in the development of such programmes that target livelihood conditions is established in sustainable development goal number 16 as effective post-conflict actions that consolidate peace and prevent reoccurrence of conflicts; consequently such work is more efficacious with the work of most NGOs which occurs at the micro level (Aikins, 2012: 67). In the

quest to build peace, local NGOs have been instrumental like in Rwanda where NGOs organize peace camps and soccer games for mixed Hutu and Tutsi teams, all these in attempt to instill peace in the society.

The traditional idea that states are the most crucial players in the maintenance of international peace and security has been challenged as other non-state actors including NGOs have geared their activities towards advocating for peace and provision of humanitarian aid.

The top-down approach to peace building instituted by states have been criticized and seen as authoritarian in favour of bottom-top approach (Chopra, 2000: 2 & Paris, 2004: 23). The bottom-up approach to peace building was incorporated into large-scale post-conflict reconstruction operations. However, the transformative agenda included within bottom-up peace building as initially articulated was largely excluded when the concept was incorporated into post-conflict governance.

The concept of bottom-up peace building (peace building from below) can be most effectively understood through the framework of what Michel Foucault (1991) termed "governmentality". By this, the scholar meant a manner of liberal government whereby the sovereign authority works through the freedoms of its citizens to achieve specific finalities in support of what it deems the common good. There is, of course, nothing fundamentally pernicious about attempts to resolve disputes within communities without resorting to violence. However, such attempts become problematic when community-level mechanisms for resolving conflict are co-opted to achieve other finalities of government. And they become especially problematic where the specific finalities deviate from the expressed interests of those being governed.

The ongoing armed conflict between the state and non-state armed groups in Cameroon that escalated in late 2017 has led to huge devastating effects, rising insecurity, influx of refugees into Nigeria and rise of Internally Displaced Persons with women and young people feeling the brunt of the conflict. Willis et al, (2021) opine that almost daily violence and atrocities has led to hundreds of thousands fleeing the violence. Campaigns for grassroots peace building approach have been intensified in the restive regions as local NGOs and Civil Society Organisations (CSO) recommitted into peace building from below. Such campaigns were given particular impetus by the establishment in May 2018 of the Southwest/Northwest Women's Task Force (SNWOT) by leaders of women's organisations and individual female activists, the creation of Youth Initiatives for Peace building and Conflict Resolution in 2019 and other activities of already established NGOs such as Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) and Network of Human Rights Defenders in Central Africa (REDHAC). Pearson (2001) recognizes this approach as essential in resolving conflicts as it creates space for the needs, perspectives and practices of local communities to be included in peace processes. Urlacher (2008: 619-621) further provides that bottom-up approaches recognise the efforts of local communities in navigating and mitigating daily challenges in the midst of conflict. The interaction of NGOs with local communities is also significant and may commence with the provision of humanitarian relief, considered by Bigdon and Korf (2004) as an important element in transforming a conflict.

The main official attempt at conflict resolution (top to bottom) this far was the government-organised 'Major National Dialogue' from 30th September to 4th October 2019. This was unsuccessful and criticised for being elite-oriented and excluding key actors (Köpp, 2019). Not only were major non-state armed groups excluded but also the participation of local NGOs, especially youth and women organisations, were limited. Some analysts even doubted the sincerity of the government, (International Crisis Group, 2019) with the military crackdown in the Anglophone regions intensifying immediately afterwards, and the government seemingly determined to pursue a military solution. Additionally, international offers from the Swiss government and the Vatican to mediate peace talks have been rejected (International Crisis Group, 219).

Therefore, in a context where top-down peace building efforts have not made progress towards resolving the armed conflict, what can a bottom-up (peace building from below) approach offer? In recent times the

scholarly literature on the local turn in peace building has placed more emphasis on a bottom-up or grassroots approach, inclusive of the role of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). The role of NGOs in peace building from below is often perceived as positive and significant in seeking more lasting and legitimate peace agreements. Yet, on the other hand, such bottom-up peace building is limited by the restrictions being imposed on NGOs. It is from the foregoing that this article examines the effectiveness of peace building activities from below instituted by local NGOs in resolving armed conflict and building peace.

LITERATURE REVIEW IN CONTEXT

War has changed into increasingly affecting directly, NGOs (Nordstrom, 2004:58). The concept of new wars, describes conflicts that are commonly fought with non-state actors, fighting for identity and extensively affecting the population, making them a pawn in the conflict, hence blurring the lines between the civil society and the actors, objectives and scheme of the conflict (Kaldor, 2013: 2-3). Naturally, this has consequences on how peace building, including reconciliation, should be handled, stretching over the entire society and addressing Peace, Justice, Truth and Mercy (Lederach, 1997: 28-29). The recent civil war of South Sudan is a typical new war. To reach sustainable peace in such setting there needs to be a link with peace building from below.

Sustainable peace will hereafter be defined as off Solomon's foreword to Lederach's (1997: ix) *Building Peace*: Sustainable peace requires that long-time antagonists not merely lay down their arms but that they achieve profound reconciliation that will endure because it is sustained by a society-wide network of relationships and mechanisms that promote justice and address the root causes of enmity before they can regenerate destabilizing tensions. To reach sustainable peace there is a need to include all levels in the society, from top to bottom. For this, there is a consensus in recent peace research (Autesserre, 2014: 64; Kingston, 2012: 333; Ripsman, 2016: 3). Ripsman (2016: 14) presents some "theories that imply that peacemaking should be most successful as a bottom-up process when key societal actors or society as a whole embrace conflict resolution for economic, political, or normative reasons and press their political leaders to negotiate peace". Commonly the bottom level is considered first after the armed violence ended while Lederach (1997:20) thinks it is needed all along the entire process. To put it simple, peace building from below is an inclusive approach acknowledging the importance of the ground level to be able to reach sustainable peace.

The wide-ranging approach also has importance from a representation point of view. The real human cost of conflict on the ground, might differ from the politically expressed perspective and this will influence the peace process (Mac Ginty and Firchow, 2015: 309-310). In reverse the lack of representation can be the cause for violence, especially in weak states where the opposition is not given enough opportunity to provoke change with non-violent means (Lederach, 1997: 9). The significance of state building to create durable peace is emphasised by several scholars as it gives the population possibility to be included. Ripsman (2016: 24) refers to Benjamin Miller's state-to-nation congruence which highlights the societal influences on conflict "War is likely to occur when a single state contains many nations". To solve the conflict there is a need to acknowledge the ostracised nationalities to create balance in the society. This is how South Sudan was born as an independent state. South Sudan still contains many nations hence the theory can still be a tool for understanding the conflict and possible means for peace. State building does not only refer to representation and territory but also accessible institutions and basic services (Hanagen and Tilly, 2010: 254).

Other scholars focus more on the economic development when building peace from below. For instance via cooperate businesses due to trade opportunities (Rispman, 2016: 22) or humanitarian activities funded by external donors and the succeeding implication on community participation to commence political and

social change (Kingston, 2012: 340).

The affected population can be divided into different levels (top-middle-grassroots) depending on their influence in the society but also their amount. The top level is the smallest section the elite of the country, while in contrast the grassroots is the biggest segment constituted of the major population (Lederach, 1997: 38). Different levels have different position and authority in the peace process. Actors are also affected differently: unlike many actors at the higher levels of the pyramid, however, grassroots leaders witness firsthand the deep-rooted hatred and animosity on a daily basis. This highlights the importance of including all levels to break stereotypes and violent patterns. A signed peace agreement will not by itself affect the emotions and the grievance in a population. The grassroots might be occupied by ensuring day to day basic needs and prioritise survival in front of the peace building process (Anderson and Olson, 2003: 24; Lederach, 1997: 52). Lederach (1997: 60-61) argues that the level with the prime opportunity to facilitate peace building is the middle one, just as the position indicates, by being in the middle with links to both the elite and the community.

An actor who is however more examined is the NGO sector. An actor with the advantage of being in the middle with access to both communities and authorities (Goodh and, 2006: 123), who therefore can mediate in-between. In the same time as they can move rather freely due to their shield of neutrality and impartiality. Though there are continues discussions if NGO activities in conflict zones are contributing to the situation or not. This includes the impact on peace building. The "Do No Harm" concept points out the importance of being aware of one's own influence on dividers and connectors. Basically NGOs need to acknowledge that there might be consequences of the planned activities which were not as intended (Wallace, 2015: 15-16). If international staff makes the choice to intervene they have a responsibility to at least not make the situation worse (Anderson and Olson, 2003: 21).

These elite-level approaches have focused on the formulation and implementation of official peace agreements. However, such top-down approaches have been subject to criticism. Pearson emphasises that elite approaches to resolving ethno-political conflicts can be problematic because they undermine trust, and outcomes often do not reflect the needs of most-affected local populations (Pearson, 2001). Labonte (2012) concurs, noting that elite approaches enable those in authority to 'control, shape and manipulate decision-making processes or institutions' for their personal interests at the cost of the populace. In response, a bottom-up or grassroots approach, often associated with Lederach (1997) has increasingly taken centre-stage in peace building discourses. Mac Ginty (2013: 763-783) places emphasis on the significance of local actors and of the non-governmental sector and the links with local knowledge and wisdom. Some analysts consider such 'peace building from below' as essential to resolving conflicts, (Ramsbotham, 2016) notably in Africa, given that such approaches create space for the needs, perspectives and practices of local communities to be included in peace processes. Further, as noted by Urlacher (2008) bottom-up approaches recognise the efforts of local communities in navigating and mitigating daily challenges in the midst of conflict. The interaction of NGOs with local communities is also significant and may commence with the provision of humanitarian relief, considered by Bigdon and Korf (2002) as an important element in transforming a conflict. In his discussion on 'everyday peace', Mac Ginty (2013: 763-783) further argues for the recognition of such local peace initiatives if peace building is to be sustainable. In other words, such initiatives should be recognised by the state and the international community in order to have maximum impact, particularly at the national level.

The most influential or famous theory of conflict transformation by John Paul Lederach is closely tied to the theoretical framework of peace building from below (Campbell, 2011: 39-56). His theory establishes three levels of local engagement in conflict resolution. Track I refers to the top local political leadership. Track II refers to middle-range local leadership and Track III to the grassroots movements (Paffenholz, 2014). As stated above, liberal peace mostly engages with Track I (Donais& Knorr, 2013: 54-69). The role of NGOs in this theory is to contribute to conflict resolution through aiding in creation of alternatives when the top-

down approach comes to a stalemate or preparing a society for peace (Paffenholz, 2014: 11-27). Lederach (2015) stated that strategies of conflict transformation must include the community or would otherwise not be effective at all as human relationships are at the heart of conflict transformation. Should the structural differences not be addressed, it would not be transformative. This community-based approach would then take into account the perspectives of the people directly affected by the conflict and the violence and use this as a point of departure for conflict resolution and peace building (Campbell, 2011: 43). Lederach (2015) identified four modes of impact for transformation within a conflict.

The majority of these conflicts and the eventual reconstruction processes take place in fragile states, which do not have the necessary resources and require external financial assistance in order to get through this phase. States fail when they cannot provide political goods to their society and lose legitimacy in the face of their citizens. Approximately half of the states of the world are in a weakening process, that is, they are becoming fragile. Some like Somalia have reached collapse. The governments of most of these states confront armed revolts, with long-term violence (like in Angola, Burundi, Sudan and Cameroon) directed towards the government and justified by demands for political or geographical autonomy, discrepancies between different communities for ethnic, religious or other reasons, and/or the attempt to control the scarce resources available. The presence of Non-Governmental Organisations in conflict zones is hardly a new phenomenon (Robert, 2002). The International Committee of the Red Cross has cared for the victims of modern conflict situations for some time. More recently, a number of international humanitarian organisations like Care International, Oxfam, Action Aid among others have been highly visible players in coping with disasters. What is different about the human rights NGO activism in zones of conflict is that many groups are now playing a leading role in trying to defuse nascent or full blown conflicts, as opposed to just cleaning up the human suffering that results (Ndung'u Wainaina, 2006).

NGOs have developed a wide range of conflict prevention and resolution activities including monitoring conflict and providing early warning of new violence; opening dialogue between adversarial parties; playing a direct mediating role; strengthening local institutions for conflict resolution; and helping to strengthen the rule of law and democratic processes in countries affected by violent conflict. After the Cold War, new forms of conflict have broken out around the world. NGOs have emerged as important partners to both national governments and international agencies engaged in diplomacy and conflict resolution in dealing with conflict and reconstruction. Also, these NGOs have played a critical role in seeking to turn loose talk about "global civil society" into a concrete reality on the ground. Like international relief agencies, NGOs focusing on conflict resolution respond to major failures on the part of the international community to deal effectively with global problems. Too often, intergovernmental bodies and agencies have proved too slow and cumbersome in dealing with emerging urgent crisis situation as demonstrated in Bosnia, Rwanda, Somalia, DRC and Darfur. Also, both international agencies and governments often have institutional and political limitations that hamper their effectiveness in situations of enormous complexity and delicacy.

NGOs facilitate up to date extensive fact-finding missions, engage in dialogue with a wide range of groups involved in conflicts, map out strategies for defusing conflict and galvanize action by national governments and international organisations to help stabilize tense situations. Situations in Burundi, Northern Uganda, Southern Sudan, Darfur, DRC and Rwanda provide examples of where NGOs have played a decisive role in heading off major conflicts.

In recent years, there has been increased recognition of the role NGOs can play as partners with government and intergovernmental organisations in the conflict resolution and peace-building agenda (Barnes, 2006). Against this backdrop, it is important to examine the diverse interventions that Non-governmental organisations undertake especially in crisis such as the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon that will be worthy of replications in other warring countries and situations. Perhaps an interesting perspective for the reader might be to access the level of interventions that NGOs have done since the crisis started and how they have

been felt across the Central Africa's sub region.

Applicability of the theory

The theory of Subsidiarity is grounded in the idea that sustainable peace is best achieved when conflict resolution mechanisms are driven by those actors who are most affected by and closest to the conflict. The concept of subsidiarity goes back very far (Utz 1953; Blickle et al. 2002), the term and its current usage are quite recent.The theory of subsidiarity calls for social problems to be addressed from the bottom up, rather than from the top down. This articulates the concept of peace building from below as implemented by NGOs in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon. Subsidiarity holds that where families, neighborhoods, churches, or community groups can effectively address a given problem, they should. Where they cannot, municipal or state governments should intervene. Only when the lower bodies prove ineffective should the federal government become involved.

In social and political philosophy the principle of subsidiarity is a principle which states that in the relationship among communities, but also in the relation of the individual to any form of human community, the smaller social or political entity or institution ought to be given priority (e.g., the individual should come before the community, the community before the state, the state before the federation, and so on). In this context, it is an important, if not the most important, responsibility of the bigger institution to enable the smaller one to perform its tasks and to provide it with any necessary support (subsidium) (Herzog, 1998). Subsidiarity has been long recognized as a principle for organizing divisions of labour. By one definition, subsidiarity is the principle that a central authority should have a subsidiary function in carrying out only those tasks that cannot be done effectively at a more immediate or local level. Historically subsidiarity has been applied to organize relations between central and local authorities, but increasingly the principle has also been applied in international politics to govern relations between nongovernmental organisations.

The relevance of the theory in this article reveals how NGOs working in the conflict regions have created awareness to issues of peace building from below since they are directly in volve with the grassroots. Local actors are said to be more aware of nuances and the underlying issues of a situation. With better analysis and understanding, their role can be more fitting to the task at hand. Also, with the bottom up approach used by NGOs and due to proximity, local actors have more to potentially gain. Local actors are more interested in seeing sustainable and effective outcomes than a more distant actor might be. In all, all these factors are likely to come together to give local actors a more adaptable approach to the issue at hand, in that they can more quickly respond to changes on the ground and actors that are closer are viewed as more legitimate than distant actors. Previous relationships and closeness thus also reflect positively on the ability of local individuals and bodies to act. To add, the theory of subsidiarity enhances sustainability of peace processes since it gives priority to the communities to address their problems with meaningful involvement of local NGOs, increases the likelihood of a sustainable peace process.

The article employed the quantitative research approach with use of survey (questionnaire) for data collection. Data was collected in Buea subdivision targeting over 107 inhabitants. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the targeted audience based in Buea Sub-division and this was based on inhabitants who are well knowledgeable as to the activities of local NGOs in the area. Data collected from the field was analysed using the SPSS software and presented in figures and charts.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Table 1. Peace building activities of NGOs

Activities	Frequency	Percent
Provide basic needs (food, shelter, water)	31	29%

Provide medical or nutritional facilities	16	15%
Provide education	14	13.1%
Engage in peace advocacy	40	37.4%
Resettlement of conflict affected persons	3	2.8%
Help in disarmament and reintegration of ex-combatants	3	2.8%
Total	107	100

Source: Field survey, 2023

Table 1 above illustrates the peace building activities carried out by NGOs as revealed by the respondents. 40 respondents representing 37.4% reveal that NGOs have been engaging in peace advocacy, 31 respondents representing 29% holds that NGOs have been providing basic needs such as food, shelter and water to the affected communities. 16 respondents representing 15% indicates that NGOs provide medical or nutritional facilities to affected civilians, 14 respondents representing 13.1% opines that peace education is among the activities Carried out by NGOs. Also, 3 respondents signifying 2.8% reveals that NGOs have been involved in resettlement of conflict affected persons and lastly 3 respondents signifying 2.8% holds that NGOs have been assisting in the disarmament and reintegration of ex-combatants of the ongoing conflict.

Table 2. Top most NGOs activities in peace building from below

Activities	Frequency	Percent
Advocacy for peace	20	18.7%
Sensitization on No to drug abuse	16	15%
Sports and cultural activities	6	5.6%
Capacity building for youths	30	28%
Identifying the causes of the conflict	9	8.4%
Protection of human rights	26	24.3%
Total	**107**	**100**

Source: Field survey, 2023

The above table shows the top most NGOs activities instrumental in achieving peace building from below. 30 respondents amounting to 28% holds that capacity building of youths is the most important activities carried out by NGOs in achieving peace building from below. This is followed by 26 respondents representing 24.3% who opine that the protection of human rights is instrumental for NGOs in sustaining peace building from below. 20 respondents accounting 18.7% reveal that advocacy for the return to peace is an important activity in achieving peace building from below. In scale of preference, the above are the 3 top activities NGOs involved in to achieve peace building from below. In addition, 16 respondents representing 15% holds that the campaign to sensitize on No to drug abuse could be helpful to NGOs in achieving peace building from below. 9 respondents representing 8.4% reveal that the identification of the causes of conflict is important in sustaining peace building from below and lastly 6 respondents representing 5.6% opine that sports and cultural activities is among the activities carried out by NGOs in achieving peace building from below.

Figure 1. Effectiveness of peace building activities from below
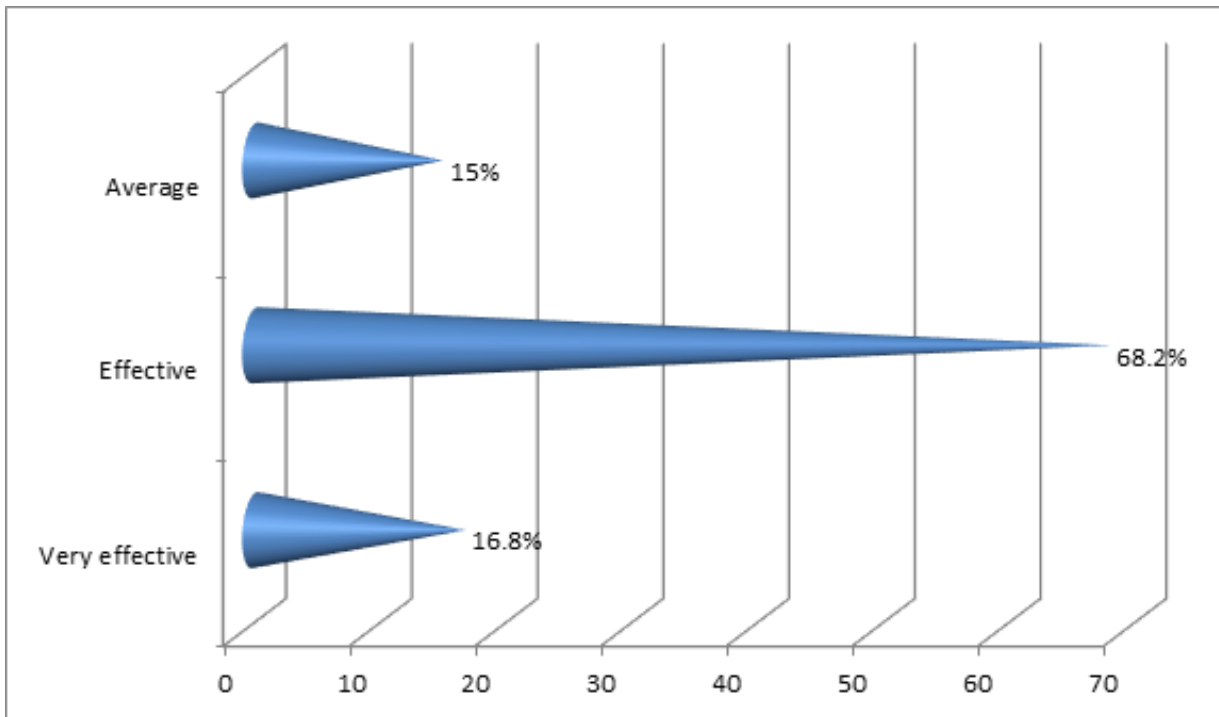
Source: Field survey, 2023

Figure 1 above illustrates the effectiveness of peace building activities from below, 68.2% of the respondents hold that the peace building activities carried out by NGOs have been effective while 16.8% of respondents reveal that the peace building activities carried out by NGOs have been very effective and lastly 15% of respondents indicate that these activities have been averagely carried by NGOs.

CONCLUSION

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are doing even more peace building activities than any official governmental agencies. In many of the areas of the world at large and in Cameroon in particular, they have a long term presence that is afflicted with intractable conflicts. NGOs are in an excellent position to engage in a wide variety of peace building activities from below. Added to the process of providing humanitarian aid and mediation, they are also well positioned to engage in empowerment and capacity building among the local population in getting them involved with the adversary in a variety of joint activities. In accordance with official government peace building efforts in general, the goal of NGOs effort is usually conflict reduction and peace building from below, not just between official actors but also among ordinary citizens.

Focusing on the effectiveness of these activities/initiatives in resolving and building peace in Buea sub-division, this paper establishes that the activities of NGOs in peace building from below have been effective. Peace building from below is not merely a concept, but concrete practice. There fore theories of practice by Bourdieu (1977), de Certeau (1984) and Lave and Wenger (1991) are highly relevant to the ethnographic study of peace building from below. The paper states that NGOs have effectively implemented the following; advocacy for peace, sensitization on no to drug abuse, sports and cultural activities, capacity building for youths, identifying the causes of the conflict, and protection of human rights as peace building from below activities. Advocacy and lobbying, liaising and networking come at the top of the list. NGOs have played a key role in assisting, protecting and accompanying victims of the conflict, defending human rights, creating awareness among the most excluded sectors and strengthening their capacity. In this way, grassroots organisations (e.g. women, indigenous peoples) are becoming more vocal and more empowered.

NGOs have played a very important role advocating and lobbying the international community on the Cameroonian context, emphasising the need for a negotiated peaceful solution of the conflict, and arguing for the full compliance of human rights and International Humanitarian Law standards as key components of peace building from below.

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