The Asymmetrical Erosion of Intergenerational Solidarity: Unmasking the Illusion of Normative Respect in Peacebuilding Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Intergenerational dialogue is increasingly recognized as a vital mechanism for peacebuilding in ethnically diverse, post-conflict societies. However, traditional applications of Intergenerational Solidarity Theory often assume that the dimensions of solidarity erode uniformly. This research investigated the current state of intergenerational relations and the barriers to effective dialogue in Nakuru County, Kenya, a region historically plagued by electoral violence and political manipulation. Using a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, data were collected from 139 survey respondents, 27 Key Informant Interviews, and 9 Focus Group Discussions across Naivasha, Molo, and Njoro sub-counties. Quantitative findings revealed a paradox: while normative solidarity (respect for elders) remained exceptionally high (M = 4.09), associational (communication) and affectional (trust) solidarity scored significantly lower (M = 3.47 and 3.34, respectively). Qualitative micro-ethnographies indicated that this high statistical rating for "respect" largely reflects an enforced cultural script based on fear and obligation rather than genuine cognitive or emotional solidarity. The study introduces the concept of "asymmetrical erosion of intergenerational solidarity," arguing that in gerontocratic, conflict-affected societies, high ratings of normative respect can mask a severe, silent erosion of structural and functional solidarity driven by rural-urban migration, digital divides, and the weaponization of elders by political elites. The findings suggest that peacebuilding interventions relying solely on superficial normative respect, without rebuilding daily associational interactions, are likely to be ineffective.

Keywords: Intergenerational dialogue, asymmetrical erosion, peacebuilding, normative solidarity, Nakuru County, conflict transformation.

INTRODUCTION

Peaceful coexistence in pluralistic societies is anchored on social cohesion and the existence of relational mechanisms capable of resolving differences constructively (Galtung, 1969; Interpeace, 2024). In recent years, intergenerational dialogue has emerged as a highly effective mechanism for sustaining this cohesion, facilitating the exchange of knowledge between younger and older demographics to dismantle persistent grievances (UNDP, 2022). Globally, post-conflict societies have leveraged cross-generational exchanges to process historical trauma, from the Gacaca courts in Rwanda to the Fambul Tok initiatives in Sierra Leone (Clark, 2010; Shaw, 2022).

However, the efficacy of intergenerational dialogue is heavily dependent on the underlying quality of the relationship between the generations. In the African context, traditional governance systems historically depended on older people to guide communities through oral traditions, cultural norms, and conflict

mediation (Akinwale, 2010). Institutions such as the Kikuyu Kiama, Kalenjin Kokwet, and Maasai Iloshon actively mentored younger generations, ensuring the transmission of indigenous knowledge and maintaining social equilibrium (Kenyatta, 2011). Contemporary changes, including rapid urbanization, economic transformation, and political conflict, have significantly weakened these traditional systems, creating widening generational gaps (Kaplan, 2002; Bengtson et al., 2012).

In Kenya, escalating political and ethnic conflict, particularly during election cycles, has been attributed to weakened interactions between youth and older people (Kagwanja, 2009; Kanyinga & Long, 2012). Nakuru County serves as a highly concentrated microcosm for examining these fractures. Historically recognized as a persistent flashpoint for intercommunal violence, the county's instability is driven by extreme ethnic heterogeneity and fiercely contested land tenure systems (Human Rights Watch, 2008; Boone, 2022). The 2007–2008 post-election violence (PEV) left an indelible scar on the county's relational fabric, with local politicians co-opting traditional elders to provide cultural legitimacy while economically marginalized youth were mobilized as the primary perpetrators of violence (Anderson, 2021). This trajectory of exploitation catalyzed a deeply entrenched cycle of intergenerational trauma.

Despite the recognized importance of intergenerational relations in peacebuilding, empirical evidence on how these relationships structurally function in multi-ethnic, conflict-prone settings remains limited. Specifically, existing literature frequently treats intergenerational cohesion as a monolithic construct, failing to disaggregate the specific dimensions of solidarity that survive or collapse in the face of modern political and economic pressures. This study aimed to address this gap by examining the current status of intergenerational relations and the barriers to effective dialogue in Nakuru County, applying Bengtson and Roberts' (1991) Intergenerational Solidarity Theory to a communal, post-conflict African setting.

Statement of the Problem

The current peace framework in Nakuru County reveals a critical intergenerational gap. The elderly frequently pass down accounts of past injustices and ethnic mistrust to the youth, while the youth feel alienated from existing traditional peace structures due to unemployment, social marginalization, and fast digital transformation. This social disconnect generates an avenue for youth radicalization and exploitation by politicians, especially during stages of instability, due to an unstructured mechanism for intergenerational transmission of knowledge.

Although there have been efforts to integrate youth into peacebuilding processes, they have borne little fruit because they operate on the assumption that the presence of "respect" equates to relational health. Existing literature does not adequately explain how specific dimensions of intergenerational solidarity such as normative respect, daily communication, and functional support interact in conflict-prone environments. There is a scant understanding of how high statistical ratings of respect for elders can coexist with profound mistrust and political violence. This limitation hinders the design of targeted peacebuilding interventions, as resources are often wasted attempting to reinforce a normative respect that is already culturally saturated, while ignoring the silent erosion of functional and associational bonds. This study therefore sought to investigate the asymmetrical nature of intergenerational solidarity and its implications for peaceful coexistence in Nakuru County.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study was grounded in Intergenerational Solidarity Theory (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991) and Conflict Transformation Theory (Lederach, 1997). Intergenerational Solidarity Theory provides an analytical lens focused on the quality of relationships between youth and older persons across six dimensions: affectional (trust), associational (communication), consensual (shared values), functional (mutual help), normative (respect/obligation), and structural (geographic proximity). Conflict Transformation Theory frames peacebuilding as a long-term, relational process of repairing broken relationships.

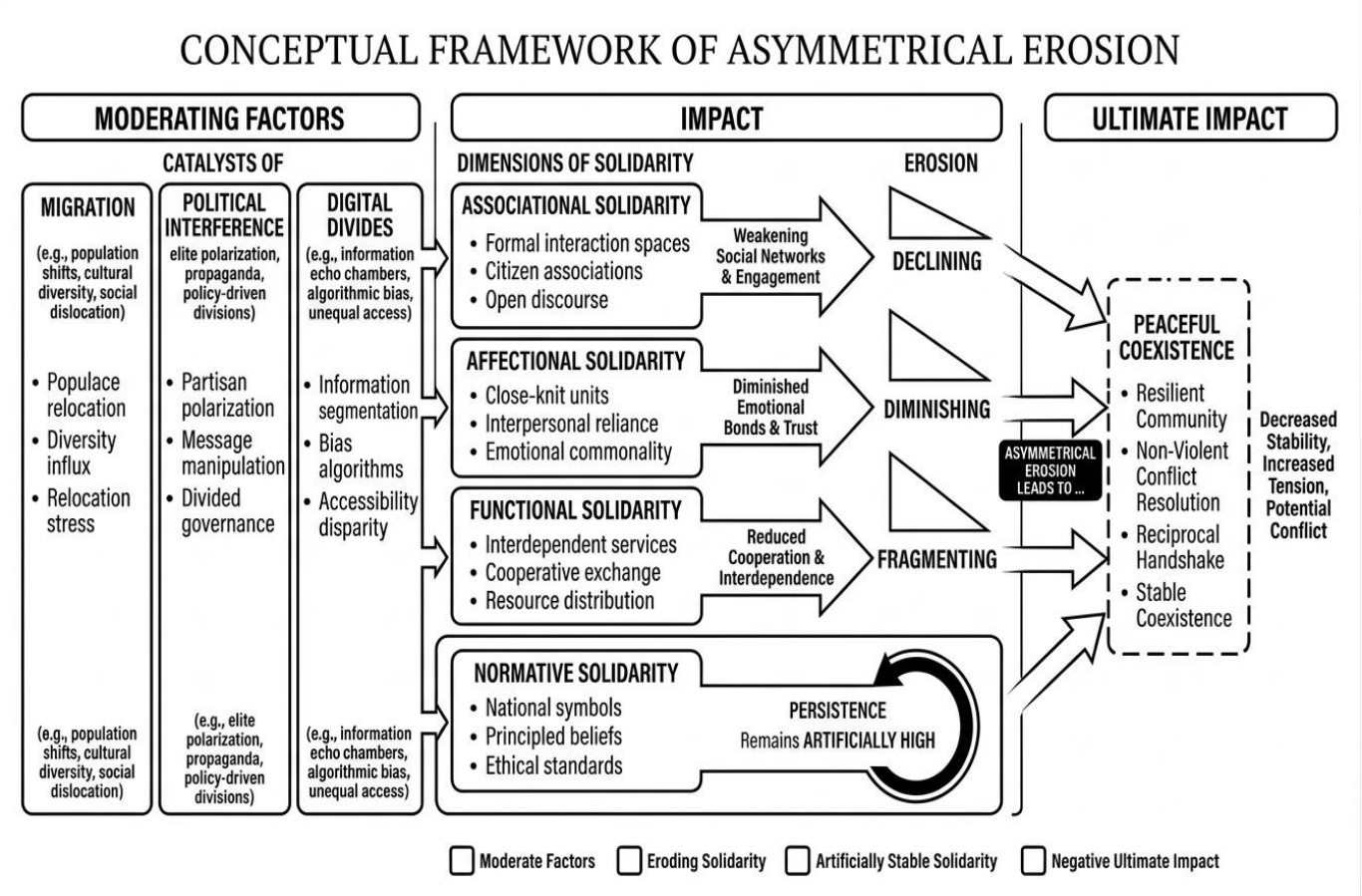


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Asymmetrical Erosion

The framework illustrates how moderating factors including migration, political interference, and digital divides may weaken associational, affectional, and functional dimensions of solidarity, while normative solidarity remains comparatively high. The resulting asymmetrical erosion of solidarity is expected to influence peaceful coexistence.

Theoretical Operationalization: Asymmetrical Erosion

While classic Intergenerational Solidarity Theory assumes that the six dimensions are interdependent and generally decline or persist in tandem, this study introduces the concept of asymmetrical erosion. This concept posits that in highly gerontocratic, conflict-affected societies, structural, associational, and affectional solidarity can severely degrade due to modernization and political interference, while normative solidarity (respect) remains artificially resilient. This persistence is not indicative of relational health, but rather of enforced cultural coercion. Asymmetrical erosion thus accounts for the divergence between superficial normative compliance and the collapse of genuine functional and emotional bonds.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Operational Definitions

Intergenerational Dialogue	Refers to structured or informal communication and exchange between youth aged 18–35 years and older persons aged 60 years and above, aimed at resolving conflict, sharing values and experiences, strengthening mutual understanding, and promoting community cohesion.
Asymmetrical Erosion	Refers to a condition in which normative expectations concerning respect for and recognition of elders remain relatively resilient, while opportunities for regular intergenerational interaction, reciprocal support, communication, and shared participation are weakened by structural and social conditions.

Research Design

The study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Quantitative survey data provided broad statistical patterns and attitudinal measures across the target population, while qualitative data captured the underlying lived experiences and cultural meanings. Running these two tracks independently prevented methodological bias, allowing statistical patterns and narrative realities to serve as equal, complementary forms of evidence (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative data was structured as a multiple case study, treating Naivasha, Molo, and Njoro as distinct units of analysis.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires, semi-structured Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The questionnaire captured socio-demographic information and perceptions of intergenerational relations using a 5-point Likert scale. KIIs were conducted with 27 purposively selected stakeholders, including community leaders, religious leaders, youth leaders, and peace committee members. Nine FGDs were held across the three sub-counties, comprising youth-only, elder-only, and mixed stakeholder groups to minimize power imbalances and encourage open discussion. Non-participant observation was also utilized during the FGDs to capture physical choreography and non-verbal cues of intergenerational interaction.

Sampling

The target population comprised community members directly involved in or affected by intergenerational relations in Naivasha, Njoro, and Molo. Based on Cochran's (1977) formula, a minimum sample size of 384 was determined. However, due to logistical constraints, community fatigue regarding sensitive conflict topics, and the time-intensive nature of the qualitative component, a total of 150 questionnaires were distributed, yielding 139 valid responses (a 92.7% response rate). While the quantitative sample was reduced, it surpassed the minimal requirement of 100 samples needed for parametric inferential statistics (Pallant, 2020) and was robustly complemented by the 27 KIIs and 9 FGDs.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded, entered, and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 26. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were generated to summarize intergenerational constructs. Inferential statistics, including Pearson correlation and Multiple Regression, were used to examine relationships between variables. To ensure methodological transparency, model fit statistics including R2, adjusted R2, F-statistics, and standardized beta (β) coefficients are reported.

Qualitative data from KIIs and FGDs were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) framework to ientify patterns and develop analytically meaningful themes. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data occurred during the interpretation phase using a joint display approach. Specifically, quantitative mean scores representing paradoxical relationships (e.g., high normative respect alongside low trust) were jointly interpreted alongside qualitative themes (e.g., fear-based compliance and political weaponization) to mutually corroborate the evidence supporting the central argument of asymmetrical erosion.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval was obtained from the Catholic University of Eastern Africa Ethics Review Committee. Administrative permissions were sought from relevant county and local government authorities in Nakuru County. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time. A trauma-informed approach was maintained throughout the study due to the sensitivity of past electoral violence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Intergenerational Solidarity Dimensions

Intergenerational Solidarity Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)	Disagree/Strongly Disagree (%)
Normative Solidarity (Respect for Elders)	4.09	0.95	70.5%	8.0%
Consensual Solidarity (Cultural Knowledge Transfer)	3.86	1.01	60.4%	13.0%
Social Harmony (Outcome of Solidarity)	3.89	1.07	63.3%	17.0%
Functional Solidarity (Youth Participation in Decisions)	3.81	1.03	50.0%	21.7%
Associational Solidarity (Regular Communication)	3.47	1.12	49.0%	21.0%
Affectional Solidarity (Trust and Emotional Closeness)	3.34	1.18	43.0%	25.0%

The data in Table 1 reveals a stark dissonance in the dimensions of intergenerational solidarity. The highest-rated statement was normative solidarity: “The older generation is held in high esteem as custodians of cultural knowledge in my community” (M = 4.09), with 70.5% of participants agreeing. Conversely, the foundational pillars of relational health—associational solidarity (regular communication, M = 3.47) and affectional solidarity (trust, M = 3.34)—scored significantly lower, with high percentages of respondents expressing neutral or negative attitudes.

The Illusion of Normative Respect

To explain the reason for the towering 4.09 mean score in normative respect coexisting alongside very low scores in daily trust and communication, one must turn to the qualitative micro-ethnographies. The findings reveal that the 4.09 score does not measure genuine affectional solidarity or cognitive agreement. Rather, it measures strict adherence to a fear-and-duty-bound cultural script.

In a Focus Group Discussion in a rural location in Njoro, the nuances of “respect” were observed physically. When an older man in his late sixties arrived late to the session, the youth who had been relaxed, speaking in Sheng (Nairobi street language), and busy on their phones suddenly sat up straight. Two young men quickly stood, fetched plastic chairs, wiped them clean with their jackets, and presented them to the elder in silence. When directly questioned, a 24-year-old man stated:

“They taught us that when you don't respect your elder, he will curse you, or you won't make it in life. Even when the elder is wrong, you can't confront him.”

This interaction proves that respect in Nakuru does not equate to affectional solidarity. The youth perform the role of respectful subordinates due to the cultural risk involved in violating the script social ostracization or supernatural curses. Thus, interventions that seek to “fix” intergenerational relationships by adding more lessons on how to respect elders are bound to fail spectacularly, as this dimension is already at maximum capacity through coerced compliance.

The Erosion of Associational and Affectional Solidarity

While normative respect remains artificially high, the structural and functional foundations required to actualize that respect have been entirely eroded. The qualitative data revealed that the high level of agreement (M = 3.86; 60.4%) that "cultural knowledge is successfully transmitted" reflects a nostalgia for a past that no longer exists. In Molo, an elderly man pointed to a locked, grass-thatched kiama (council of elders) hut, stating:

"This is the 'kiama' house... The elders would come at midnight and tell us the rules of our ancestors... Look at it now. It is a store for maize sacks. The youth are in Nairobi, or they are in their rooms scrolling TikTok. Not one of them knows the sacred songs."

This testimony highlights the collapse of structural and functional solidarity. The passing down of culture occurred through location-specific, labor-related processes in farm fields and initiation huts. Urbanization and labor commodification have deprived the community of the locations and time available to mentor youth. Consequently, communication (M = 3.47) has been pathologized. As one respondent in Molo noted, "Communication usually happens only when there is a problem instead of being continuous. We do not talk when the sun is shining. We only gather when the storm comes." Dialogue is now exclusively associated with conflict resolution, making both generations defensive.

Furthermore, the 3.89 mean for social harmony was exposed as "negative peace." An elder woman in Naivasha described the modern "WhatsApp funeral": bodies are brought from Nairobi at 4 AM, buried by 10 AM, and the youth are back on matatus to the city by 2 PM. The youth record the burial to send to relatives via WhatsApp, but they do not cook, dig graves, or sit with the elders. The absence of overt violence is misinterpreted as harmony, masking a siloed, sterile coexistence.

The Weaponization of Elders and Political Interference

The most severe barrier to affectional solidarity (trust) is political interference. Quantitative findings identified political interference as a major barrier (M = 3.8; 79% agreement). Qualitative data revealed a deliberate, calculated weaponization of the generational divide. A youth leader in Naivasha explained the mechanics:

"During the election season, a politician will not come to the youth directly. He goes to the elders. He gives them a brown envelope [money]... The elder, who is struggling to pay school fees, takes the money. The next day at the baraza, the elder stands up and delivers the politician's message, wrapping it in the language of tradition and culture."

This deliberate poisoning of relationships transforms elders from peacebuilders into political agents. The youth look at their grandparents and see frauds selling their future for 5,000 shillings. Respect dies instantly. Politicians actively weaponize the normative solidarity (respect for elders) to achieve their own ends, which in turn destroys the affectional solidarity (trust) between the youth and the elder. This structural rupture ensures that the implicit intergenerational contract remains irreparably fractured.

Inferential Statistics

Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong, positive, statistically significant correlation between Intergenerational Relations and Platform Effectiveness, $r(115) = .614$, $p < .001$. This indicates that communities with stronger baseline relational solidarity also perceive their dialogue platforms as more effective. Crucially, barriers to dialogue had a statistically significant negative correlation with both Intergenerational Relations, $r(115) = -.283$, $p = .002$, and Platform Effectiveness, $r(115) = -.312$, $p < .001$.

To further explicate these relationships, a multiple regression was conducted. The model indicated that Intergenerational Relations significantly predicted Platform Effectiveness, $\beta = .58$, $t = 7.12$, $p < .001$. The overall model fit was statistically significant, $R^2 = .376$, Adjusted $R^2 = .370$, $F(1, 133) = 80.14$, $p < .001$, indicating that approximately 37.6% of the variance in the perceived effectiveness of peacebuilding platforms is explained by the quality of baseline intergenerational relations. Conversely, when barriers (such as political interference) were entered into the model, they exerted a significant negative effect on Platform Effectiveness ($\beta = -.31$, $p < .001$), confirming that structural and relational barriers severely diminish the utility of peacebuilding platforms.

LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

While this study provides critical insights into intergenerational dynamics, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the quantitative sample size was reduced from the calculated 384 to 139 valid responses due to logistical constraints and community fatigue regarding sensitive conflict topics. While this sample surpassed the threshold for parametric inferential statistics (Pallant, 2020), the reduced n limits the statistical power of the study and restricts the generalizability of the quantitative findings to the broader population of Nakuru County.

Second, the sensitive nature of political interference and intergenerational mistrust may have introduced social desirability bias, particularly among youth respondents who might have altered their responses in the presence of researchers. To mitigate this, FGDs were segregated by age. Finally, given the qualitative emphasis on micro-ethnographies, the interpretations regarding fear-based respect and political weaponization should be understood as analytical inferences drawn from participants' lived experiences rather than definitive conclusions applicable to all gerontocratic societies. However, the robust integration of 27 KIIs and 9 FGDs provides deep contextual transferability that offsets some of the quantitative limitations.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that intergenerational solidarity in conflict-affected, gerontocratic societies like Nakuru County does not erode uniformly. The findings introduce the concept of asymmetrical erosion of intergenerational solidarity, a condition where cultural and normative commitments (respect for elders) remain relatively resilient, while structural, functional, associational, and affectional conditions supporting those commitments weaken. High statistical ratings of intergenerational "respect" can mask a severe, silent erosion of daily interaction and trust. Peacebuilding interventions that rely solely on this superficial normative respect without rebuilding daily associational interactions and protecting elders from political weaponization are destined to fail. The study demonstrates that Intergenerational Solidarity Theory must be updated to account for asymmetrical erosion as a precursor to conflict, recognizing that the persistence of one dimension of solidarity should not be taken as evidence that the entire relationship remains intact.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Shift Intervention Focus: Peacebuilding practitioners and policymakers must shift focus from reinforcing normative respect (which is already culturally saturated) to rebuilding structural and functional solidarity. This requires creating physical, protected spaces for continuous, non-crisis interaction between generations.

- Protect Dialogue Spaces from Politics: Relevant national and county authorities should develop and enforce guidelines protecting community peace structures from partisan influence. Local administrative forums (barazas) must be shielded from being converted into platforms for political mobilization, which currently destroys youth trust in elders.

- Institutionalize Reciprocal Mentorship: Intergenerational mentorship should be redesigned as a reciprocal exchange. Older persons can contribute cultural knowledge and historical experiences, while younger participants can support digital literacy, facilitating the adaptation of traditional knowledge to contemporary communication environments to bridge the associational gap.

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