Reimagining Social Transformation Through Decolonial Frameworks and African Perspectives: Rethinking Security and Sustainable Peace

Kerry Muhati[1] , Prof. Samuel Nyanchoga[2]

[1]PhD Candidate, Tangaza University

[2]Lecturer, Institute of Social Transformation (IST) Tangaza University

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ABSTRACT:

Dominant approaches to security and peacebuilding in Africa concentrate on preventing violence, stabilising the state and concluding peace agreements. These aims are significant, but they can overlook colonial legacies, African ways of knowing, and ordinary people's understandings of safety and peace. This article asks what security and sustainable peace mean in a transformative sense, and how decolonial approaches and African perspectives can help to develop them. It uses a conceptual, literature-based method: it does not collect or analyse primary data and makes no empirical claims. The article clarifies four concepts (social transformation, security, sustainable peace and conflict transformation), critically reviews decolonial theory and both foundational and contemporary African political thought, and compares the resulting position systematically with human security, liberal peacebuilding, critical (local-turn) peacebuilding and conflict transformation. It then proposes an integrated framework with five dimensions: historical and structural analysis, epistemic justice, relational and ethical foundations, institutional transformation, and collective agency. Each dimension is defined, the interactions among the dimensions are specified (including which are necessary conditions), and the framework is expressed as an analytical model with operational definitions, causal links, moderators and five testable propositions. Its distinctive claim is that epistemic justice contributes to sustainable peace only when it is converted, through meaningful participation and accountable institutions, into legitimacy and trust, and only when rights safeguards constrain both state and customary power. The article also examines its own risks: romanticising tradition, neglecting present-day political responsibility and producing new exclusions. It ends with implications for research, policy, practice and education, and a call for comparative empirical testing across African contexts.

Keywords: Social transformation; decoloniality; African perspectives; security; sustainable peace; peacebuilding; conflict transformation; epistemic justice

INTRODUCTION

Reframing Social Transformation, Security, and Sustainable Peace

Peace is not simply the absence of shooting. A quiet town can still be unsafe. Without war, a family can still go hungry, fear the police, or lack any ability to influence decisions that shape its future. Security and peace are therefore bound up with political legitimacy, fairness, economic life, memory, knowledge, and the freedom to take part in public decision making. This article begins from that wider view, and treats social transformation as the process that links these concerns.

States, aid agencies and regional institutions continue to shape how conflict is addressed through institutions inherited from earlier eras. Most security and peacebuilding models were developed outside the societies in which they are applied. They tend to concentrate on state stability, military responses, or formal agreements between armed leaders. Such measures can halt fighting, but they do not always address the deeper drivers that

can reignite it, including unequal access to land, political marginalisation, and a lack of trust between communities and the state (Paffenholz, 2021; Richmond, 2022).

A decolonial perspective and African intellectual traditions offer ways of approaching these conditions. The claim is deliberately limited: not every Western theory is unhelpful, and not every African practice is peaceful. The point is that when some voices carry more intellectual authority than others, our understanding of conflict is thin, and peace efforts built on that understanding are likely to be thin too, missing what matters to the people most affected.

1.1. Background and context

Thinking about security has changed over several decades. Early approaches concentrated on defending states against external threats. Later work asked whether individuals, and not only states, should be the primary objects of protection. The United Nations Development Programme (1994) gave this question influential form by treating human security as including economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political dimensions, and its 2022 special report extends the argument to the pressures of the Anthropocene (United Nations Development Programme, 2022). Meanwhile, the peacebuilding sector has grown to include many international organisations, donors and experts, and researchers have questioned its long-term effects and found it uneven in its results (Autesserre, 2021; Paris, 2004; Richmond, 2022).

These debates sit at the centre of postcolonial societies. Colonial rule shaped their borders, legal systems and administrative structures, and many still carry its imprint. Their own intellectual traditions concerning community, justice and living together are also rich. In this context, social transformation does not mean an optimistic injection of hope about the future. It means asking how these histories and traditions can be used to create a different future.

1.2. The problem of dominant approaches

Three features of dominant approaches deserve attention. The first is a state-centred focus. Treating the state as the primary object of protection can make community security a secondary concern, particularly when state structures are themselves a source of threat (Ake, 1996). The second is a belief in universal models of development and governance, which assumes that what has worked in one place can be transferred to another with minor adjustment (Paris, 2004; Sabaratnam, 2017). The third is external priority setting. Where funding and expertise come from outside, the agenda may follow donor interests more closely than the interests of residents.

Drawing on many years of field experience, Autesserre (2021) argues that outside interventions often fail because they overlook local knowledge and everyday practices. Her message is not that outsiders should stay away, but that peace work is more likely to succeed when it responds to those who live with its effects. The question of who knows is closely connected to the decolonial position that knowledge is a question of power.

1.3. The intellectual problem and the research gap

Scholarship on decoloniality, African thought and peacebuilding is vast, yet these literatures are often discussed separately. Decolonial writers explain how power and knowledge are interwoven. African scholars analyse values and practices that shape community life. Peace research studies the origins, continuation and termination of conflict. Each of these fields also has established, closely related bodies of work: human security, liberal and critical peacebuilding, and conflict transformation, which already address people-centred security, local ownership and structural change. An honest statement of the gap therefore has to be more precise than the claim that the fields have not been combined.

The gap addressed here is of three kinds. First, existing approaches tend to treat knowledge, institutions and relationships as separate concerns, so they rarely explain how epistemic inclusion is converted into institutional legitimacy and durable peace, or when it is not. Second, work that foregrounds local agency often has no explicit rights-based criterion for judging local practices, while work that foregrounds rights often has no account of whose knowledge defines the problem. Third, decolonial scholarship has developed powerful diagnoses of

coloniality, but it has seldom been expressed as an analytical model whose propositions can be tested in peacebuilding research. This article tries to address these three gaps, and Section 7 sets out how the proposed framework relates to each of the established approaches.

1.4. Purpose and guiding questions

The aim of the article is to develop a clear and critical account of how thinking about security and peace can be strengthened through decolonial approaches and African perspectives. The guiding question is: *What can decolonial approaches and African perspectives contribute to a transformative conception of security and sustainable peace?* Three subsidiary questions follow from it. (1) How does the proposed framework differ from, and relate to, human security, liberal peacebuilding, critical peacebuilding and conflict transformation? (2) What are its dimensions, how do they interact, and which are necessary conditions? (3) How can its causal claims be specified so that future research can operationalise and test them?

1.5. Central argument and contribution

The central argument is that sustainable peace depends not only on the absence of violence and the stability of institutions, but also on historical, epistemic, structural and relational conditions that make insecurity and conflict possible or that can change them. The article makes three contributions. First, it offers a systematic comparison of the proposed framework with four established approaches, set out in Table 1. Second, it presents an integrated framework whose five dimensions are precisely defined, with the interactions and necessity relationships among them made explicit (Tables 2 and 3). Third, it translates the framework into an analytical model with operational definitions, moderators, rival explanations and five testable propositions (Figure 1, Tables 4 and 5), and so moves the argument from conceptual plausibility toward testability.

1.6. Approach, selection of literature and criteria for integration

The article is conceptual and theory-building. It is not a systematic review, and it collects no primary data. The literature was selected purposively, not exhaustively, according to four rules: (a) works that are foundational to a debate and still contested within it; (b) recent scholarship from 2016 onward that updates or challenges those debates; (c) priority for African authors and African philosophical traditions, so that Africa is treated as a source of theory and not only as a case; and (d) deliberate inclusion of works that disagree with one another, so that the review can compare competing positions instead of summarising a single consensus.

Because a framework that merely combines literatures risks becoming an eclectic list, explicit criteria were used to decide whether a position should be integrated into the framework. A position is integrated when it meets the following criteria. *C1, explanatory relevance:* it identifies a mechanism linking knowledge, power, institutions or relationships to security or peace outcomes. *C2, historical and political grounding:* it attends both to colonial legacies and to present-day political agency. *C3, critical reflexivity:* it acknowledges its own risks, such as romanticisation or exclusion. *C4, rights compatibility:* it can be reconciled with the protection of individual and group rights. *C5, operationalisability:* its core claims can be translated into observable indicators. These criteria structure the comparison in Section 7 and the construction of the framework in Section 8. The conclusions are conceptual and should be read as propositions for testing, not as empirically established findings.

1.7. Structure of the article

Section 2 clarifies the core concepts. Section 3 reviews decolonial theory and its internal debates. Section 4 discusses African intellectual traditions, including foundational debates in African political thought. Section 5 examines colonial legacies and the contemporary production of insecurity. Section 6 sets out pathways to transformative practice. Section 7 compares the framework systematically with established approaches. Section 8 presents the framework and the analytical model. Section 9 discusses tensions and limits, Section 10 sets out implications, and Section 11 concludes.

2. Conceptualising Social Transformation, Security, and Sustainable Peace

Clear definitions help the reader to follow the argument. This section explains each concept and then how they relate to one another.

2.1. Social transformation

Social change is a general term for any change in how a society lives, such as new technology or a shift in population. Reform refers to changes in rules or organisations, such as revising a police code. Development is usually defined as an improvement in income, health or education. Social transformation is deeper. It refers to change in the structures, institutions, power relations, knowledge systems and social relationships that shape people's lives. A new road or clinic improves life, but if a few people continue to control access to land, courts and public employment, the underlying pattern remains.

The difference matters for security. Small adjustments to existing arrangements may not touch the causes of insecurity when those causes are rooted in unequal power. Real change requires harder questions about who decides, who benefits, and whose knowledge is valued (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

2.2. Security: From state protection to human and societal security

State-centred security concerns the protection of frontiers, the state and its institutions. Human security places the individual at the centre and includes freedom from fear, hunger and disease (United Nations Development Programme, 1994). Community security focuses on a community, such as a village or neighbourhood, and on the social bonds that hold it together. Critical approaches ask who defines a threat and who benefits from the definition (Booth, 1991; Buzan et al., 1998).

The last point deserves emphasis. When something is labelled a security threat, it receives priority, money and even implied authorisation to use force. A narrow definition of threats by authorities can mean that the concerns of women, pastoralists, youth and displaced families go unheard. State security and people's security are not the same: many citizens are insecure even where the government is secure (United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

2.3. Sustainable peace

Negative peace is the absence of direct violence. Positive peace exists where fairness, trust and institutions are present and accepted by the people. Structural violence is violence built into social structures, for example when people lack access to food, schooling or justice although nobody is shooting (Galtung, 1969). Sustainable peace goes beyond the absence of armed conflict. It involves handling disagreement without a return to violence, repairing damaged relationships, and having institutions that people trust. Rather than a fixed sequence of steps toward an end point, peace is better understood as a continuing process (Paffenholz, 2021), which fits her idea of perpetual peacebuilding. Peace has to be nurtured over a long period and depends on many actors and changing conditions.

2.4. Peacebuilding and conflict transformation

Peacekeeping uses outside parties to maintain a ceasefire. Peacemaking seeks agreement between the parties to a conflict. Peacebuilding strengthens the foundations that help prevent a new outbreak of violence. Conflict management aims to limit the damaging effects of conflict, whereas conflict transformation aims to change the relationships, institutions and unequal structures that generate it (Lederach, 1997, 2003). Conflict transformation is the most demanding of these aims. It treats conflict both as a problem to be addressed and as a symptom of deeper problems within society.

2.5. Integrating the concepts

Four ideas are brought together here. Social transformation is the broad change of structures, relations and knowledge. Security refers to how threats are defined and addressed. Conflict transformation concerns the causes

of conflict and the relationships involved. When these efforts are sustained and publicly accepted, sustainable peace is the condition that results. In this view, security and peace are interrelated processes of social change and not stand-alone technical tasks.

A simple example shows why this integration matters. Imagine a rural district where farmer-herder violence has stopped because of a ceasefire. If land rights remain poorly defined, if the local council excludes herders, and if outside agencies design projects without consulting local people, the ceasefire may hold for a while but the causes of conflict remain. Peace can last only if the land question, the way it is decided, and the relationship between the groups are all addressed.

3. Theoretical Foundations: Decoloniality, Power, and the Production of Security Knowledge

3.1. Coloniality of power

The Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano argued that the patterns of ranking, labouring and authorising people that colonial rule produced did not vanish when colonies became independent states. He called this "coloniality of power" (Quijano, 2000). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) describes coloniality as the continuing logic of domination, whereas colonialism is the period of direct rule. The idea suggests that old hierarchies can remain in political power, economic systems and social structures, including in the security sector. For instance, a security force created to control a colonised population may be inclined to treat citizens as subjects.

3.2. Coloniality of knowledge and epistemic injustice

Knowledge is another form of power. Some conceptions of security, development and peacebuilding are treated as universal while others are classed as local, traditional or merely cultural. This ranking determines who is invited to meetings, whose reports are read and whose experiences count as evidence. Mbembe (2021) argues that decolonisation is a process of reclaiming the right to think and speak from one's own place in the world, and not only of changing institutions.

Epistemic injustice, as Fricker (2007) defines it, is a wrong done to someone in their capacity as a knower. It takes two forms: *testimonial injustice*, when a person's word is given less credibility because of who they are, and *hermeneutical injustice*, when a group lacks the shared concepts needed to make sense of its own experience. Applied to peace work, the questions become practical. Who can define what a conflict is? Whose account is accepted as evidence? Who decides whether a programme has succeeded? Disrespect for local knowledge can lead interventions to address the wrong problem.

3.3. Coloniality of being, identity, and recognition

The third strand concerns identity and dignity (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Colonial rule sorted people into categories such as civilised and backward, or loyal and dangerous. These labels can outlive the systems that created them. In security practice they appear when some communities are treated as suspects by default, or when their suffering receives less attention than that of others. Recognition is therefore part of peace. People who do not feel respected are less likely to trust the institutions that are supposed to protect their dignity (Mbembe, 2021).

3.4. Decoloniality as intellectual and political practice

Decoloniality is not only a theory. It is also an attitude of questioning privileged hierarchies of knowledge and power. It asks who dominates thinking in books, whose voices are not being heard, and how things could be otherwise. It creates room for alternative ideas of security, community-based peace work and more participatory decision making. It does not mean closing one's eyes to ideas from elsewhere. It means that ideas from every source should be examined by the same standards.

For readers new to the subject, a useful test for any security policy is to ask three simple questions: Who wrote it? Whom is it protecting, and for what purpose? Who was asked? If the answers point to a small number of

outsiders, the policy may rest on a narrow base of knowledge, and decolonial thinking calls for bringing more knowledge to the table.

3.5. Postcolonial and critical security perspectives

Postcolonial studies analyse the culture, representation and politics produced by colonial encounters. Critical security studies ask whom security protects and how threats are constructed. Although these fields overlap with decolonial theory, none of the three is identical to it. Postcolonial work focuses on representation and discourse. Critical security studies emphasise the construction of threats. Decolonial theory places particular weight on the present global hierarchy of knowledge and the need to change it. Treating the three as rivals means losing the strengths of each. Bhambra (2021), for example, shows how the colonial history of the global economy changes our understanding of present global inequality, something that neither of the other fields can easily do on its own.

3.6. Critical assessment of decolonial frameworks

Decolonial frameworks have clear strengths. They bring history and power into view and make them accessible to people who are not part of expert discussions. They also attract criticism. The concept of coloniality can be applied so broadly that it explains everything and therefore little. Contemporary conflicts are also never caused by a single decision, whether by current governments, local elites, armed groups, or colonial rule alone. Newer problems such as digital technology, cross-border armed networks and climate pressures, which arise from global interdependence, cannot be addressed through a simple coloniser–colonised dichotomy. A framework is therefore needed that takes history seriously while remaining sensitive to present-day decisions.

3.7. Foundational debates within decolonial scholarship: a critical synthesis

Decolonial scholarship is not a single position, and comparing its main strands clarifies what the proposed framework takes from each. We distinguish four strands. *First*, the Latin American modernity/coloniality tradition (Quijano, 2000; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2011) treats coloniality as constitutive of modernity and recommends "delinking" from Eurocentric categories. Its strength is its account of how hierarchies of race, labour and knowledge are interlocked. Its weakness is that delinking is hard to specify in institutional terms and can slide into a rejection of all external ideas.

Second, African decolonial scholarship, represented here by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, 2016), applies coloniality to the postcolonial African state and challenges the "myths of decolonisation", the belief that independence ended colonial logics. It gives the strand its empirical relevance for Africa, but it too tends to describe structures more fully than it specifies mechanisms of change. *Third*, a political-institutional strand, exemplified by Mamdani (1996), explains how colonial rule created a divided state in which urban citizens enjoyed civil rights while rural subjects were governed through customary authorities. This strand is important because it links colonial history directly to present institutions, and because it warns that "custom" can itself be a colonial construction that shields unaccountable power. *Fourth*, epistemic pluralism, developed by Santos (2014) as an "ecology of knowledges" opposing what he calls epistemicide, and cautioned by Tuck and Yang (2012) against turning decolonisation into a loose metaphor detached from material change, supplies both a normative aim and a warning.

These strands disagree on at least three points. They disagree on whether the relevant break with Eurocentric thought should be total (delinking) or critical (selective engagement); on whether the principal object of analysis is knowledge, the state, or the material economy; and on whether African customary institutions are a resource or a colonial residue. The framework takes a position on each. On the first, it adopts critical engagement, consistent with Section 3.4, because wholesale rejection fails criteria C2 and C4 (it neglects present agency and offers no rights-based standard). On the second, it holds that knowledge, institutions and political economy must be analysed together, which is the reason for its five dimensions. On the third, it follows Mamdani in treating customary institutions as neither inherently harmonious nor inherently oppressive, and as requiring assessment against rights-based outcomes (Section 4.5). These choices are made explicitly so that they can be contested.

4. African Perspectives on Peace, Security, and Social Transformation

African perspectives are not illustrations of a theory developed elsewhere. They are sources of thought about conflict, community, justice and change, and this article treats them as such.

4.1. African intellectual traditions and knowledge systems

African societies hold many kinds of knowledge, including philosophical writing, oral history, proverbs, community memory and the lived experience of conflict. These can strengthen, challenge or complicate dominant approaches. For instance, a community's memory of past conflicts can explain why a particular border or grazing right is sensitive today, in ways that an official report will not capture. Mbembe (2021) reminds readers that African thought is not monolithic but a space of living debate, and should be approached as such.

4.2. Ubuntu, relationality, and human security

Ubuntu is a philosophical and ethical tradition associated especially with Southern African thought. It is often summarised by the idea that a person becomes a person through relationships with others. Metz (2022) develops this relational outlook into a moral theory in which harmony and shared identity are central. For peace and security, Ubuntu points toward mutual responsibility, respect for dignity, and reconciliation that repairs relationships and does not only punish wrongdoing (Murithi, 2006). It also supports a view of well-being as shared among members of a community.

Ubuntu must be used with care. It emerges from particular contexts and histories and is not an explanation of all African societies. Its language can also be used to silence people for the sake of harmony. It should not be treated as a ready-made answer to questions of rights and fairness. It is better understood as a set of ideas that must be tested against those questions (Metz, 2022).

4.3. African liberation thought and the transformation of domination

African liberation thinkers offer further sources. Frantz Fanon (1963) analysed the psychological and social damage of colonial rule and the need to rebuild society, and not just to replace rulers. Amílcar Cabral (1973) argued that cultural liberation and the recovery of a people's history are inseparable from political liberation. Steve Biko's Black Consciousness was about dignity and self-definition (Biko, 1978). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argued that language and education shape how people conceive themselves. These ideas bear on peace and justice because, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2016) shows, formal political change such as the ending of a regime or the signing of a settlement does not by itself dismantle the logic of domination. Peace must give dignity and authority to those who were dominated.

4.4. Foundational debates in African political thought: a critical synthesis

Four debates in African political thought are foundational, and a framework that claims to use African thought as a source of theory must engage them directly and not rely on thematic summaries.

Authenticity and hybridity. Mudimbe (1988) showed that much of what has been written as "African" knowledge was produced inside a colonial library, that is, within categories supplied by the colonisers. This warns against any search for a pure precolonial authenticity. Mazrui (1986) offers a different emphasis, describing Africa's "triple heritage" of indigenous, Islamic and Western influences as a lasting condition and not a contamination. Taken together they imply that African perspectives are best treated as plural and historically layered, which supports the framework's insistence on internal critique.

Person, community and rights. The philosophy of personhood is the central ethical debate for Ubuntu-informed peace thinking. Menkiti (1984) argued that personhood is acquired through incorporation into the community, a strongly communitarian position. Gyekye (1997) answered with a moderate communitarianism that gives weight to both community and individual rights and autonomy. Wiredu (1996) argued for conceptual decolonisation, the careful examination of inherited concepts, and for consensual decision making as an African political resource. Metz (2022) places relationality at the centre of a moral theory that yields rights-respecting

conclusions. The framework adopts the moderate position: communal obligation and individual rights are both retained, so that appeals to harmony cannot justify injustice (criterion C4).

State, custom and authority. Ake (1996) argued that the postcolonial African state remained alien to many of its citizens and that democracy imposed from outside lacked roots in popular needs. Mamdani (1996) explained the mechanism behind part of this alienation: indirect rule reinforced customary authorities as agents of the colonial state, which means that "tradition" in many places is a product of colonial administration. The consequence for peacebuilding is that local or customary institutions cannot be assumed to be authentic expressions of community will. They need to be assessed for accountability and inclusion.

Dependence and development. Nkrumah (1965) argued that political independence could coexist with continued external economic control, which he called neo-colonialism, and Nyerere (1968) proposed *ujamaa* as a path of self-reliant development based on communal values. Whatever their practical outcomes, these works show that African thinkers treated security, economy and community life as a single field. That supports the framework's attention to political economy in Dimension 1 and its refusal to separate peace from distributional questions.

Synthesis. These debates converge on three points that the framework adopts. African thought should be plural and open to criticism (Mudimbe, 1988; Mazrui, 1986). Communal values should be tested against rights-based outcomes (Gyekye, 1997; Metz, 2022). Local institutions must be examined for accountability and not romanticised (Ake, 1996; Mamdani, 1996). They also leave a tension unresolved: the framework values consensus and relational repair (Wiredu, 1996; Murithi, 2006) while insisting on rights safeguards that may override a community's consensus in some cases. This tension is acknowledged in Section 9.2.

4.5. African approaches to conflict resolution and reconciliation

Many communities address conflict through dialogue, negotiation by elders, and the restoration of customary institutions (Zartman, 2000). These methods are often designed to repair relationships and restore community life. They can be quick, familiar and trusted, and they can operate where formal courts are absent or feared. Mac Ginty (2021) describes everyday strategies of avoidance, compromise and cooperation that ordinary people use to reduce the likelihood of violence, which is relevant in many African contexts.

All of these approaches have limits. Customary authority can discriminate against women, young people and minority groups. A process that restores harmony by asking the victim to "accept" the situation can deepen injustice. Local practices should therefore be assessed by what they actually do: whether they respect rights and give a voice to all parties.

The lesson is not that customary and formal systems compete. In many places people move between them according to the problem, and choose among the elder, the church, the chief and the court. Peace work that is aware of these everyday choices is more likely to respect and strengthen the options people already have, and to extend options to those who currently lack them.

4.6. Community agency and locally led peacebuilding

Community leaders, women, youth, religious figures and civil society organisations are often the first to notice rising tensions and to take initial steps to address them. They detect threats, resolve disputes and restore trust. Autesserre (2021) argues that this local initiative and everyday presence are needed for peace efforts to succeed. The challenge is to move from symbolic consultation, which means inviting people to a workshop without involving them in decisions, funding or measurement, to real involvement in all three.

4.7. Plurality, contestation, and internal inequalities

Africa is diverse in political histories, cultures and institutions, and what is true of one place and time is not necessarily true of another. Within communities, whose voices are heard is shaped by gender, age, class, ethnicity, disability and political status. Gender is itself contested within African scholarship. Oyěwùmí (1997) argued that gender hierarchy was largely introduced by colonialism in Yoruba society, while Okech (2020) shows how African feminist thinkers build shared knowledge communities that both draw on African experience

and contest unequal power within it. The disagreement matters: if gender inequality is purely a colonial import, internal critique of customary practice would be misplaced, whereas the feminist position treats such critique as necessary. The framework follows the latter position as a matter of criterion C4, while recognising that its application varies across societies. Internal critique of this kind is an asset to African thought and not a liability. It keeps the discussion honest and prevents the construction of a one-sided story about "the African perspective".

5. Colonial Legacies and the Contemporary Production of Insecurity in African Societies

5.1. Historical boundaries, state formation, and political legitimacy

Colonial governments drew boundaries, built central administrations and frequently governed through selected local institutions (Mamdani, 1996). These decisions helped to determine who was included in politics and how people related to the state. Citizens may see government as distant or unfair, which can increase the likelihood of contests over power. But colonial borders do not account for today's conflicts. Many states have handled diversity peacefully, and the decisions of later governments have been as consequential as the legacy they inherited (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

5.2. State-centred security and the securitisation of communities

Security institutions sometimes pay more attention to regime security or territorial control than to community security. Groups may be labelled as threats because of their region, religion or livelihood, and may face harsh policing and lose confidence in public institutions (Buzan et al., 1998). Charbonneau (2021) examines how counter-insurgency operations in the Sahel, involving national and international actors, can affect politics and community-state relations in the region. The general rule is that whoever is named as a threat determines whom the state protects, whom it watches, and who regards security as legitimate.

5.3. Political economy, inequality, and conflict

Unemployment, competition for land, unequal access to public goods and services, and economies that export raw materials while offering little to local people can nurture grievances. According to Bhambra (2021), the global economy is rooted in colonialism and the distribution of wealth continues to be shaped by that history, a concern also expressed in Nkrumah's (1965) analysis of neo-colonialism. History and present-day decisions need to be distinguished. The rules of trade and colonial practices form the foundation, but the sharing of resources is at the discretion of present governments, companies and local elites. Both must be addressed if peace is to be achieved.

5.4. Knowledge hierarchies in peacebuilding interventions

International peacebuilding relies on international models, indicators and expert reports. Donor priorities and funding cycles determine which problems are recognised and which projects are funded. Richmond (2022) traces the evolution of the international peace architecture and questions the assumptions behind local ownership, while Sabaratnam (2017) shows, in the case of Mozambique, how interventions rest on Eurocentric assumptions about the societies they seek to change. External support can be useful, for example mediation skills or funding for services. It becomes harmful when it displaces local priorities, when it rewards those who speak the donors' language, or when its outputs satisfy donors but not communities.

Language is a factor here. Reports are often written in technical terms that local partners must learn in order to secure funding. Over time community groups may begin to use the funders' language when describing their own efforts, and local terms may be lost. This can be addressed through strong partnership with funders, and by getting funders to understand the language and concepts of the communities they support.

5.5. Gendered insecurity and social exclusion

Women, men, girls and boys are not affected by conflict in the same way. Displacement, sexual and gender-based violence, and exclusion from decision making are harms that gender-neutral or state-centred analysis can

miss. As Okech (2020) argues, African feminists are not only victims but thinkers and leaders, and peace has to address inequalities in the home and the market as well as on the battlefield.

5.6. The relationship between colonial legacies and contemporary agency

Historical legacies need to be interpreted together with domestic governance, political decision making, regional tensions, armed actors, climate constraints and transnational influences. A single-cause explanation of insecurity would ignore the fact that African governments and communities make real decisions and are accountable for them. History sets the range of choices, and people and institutions select among them. This perspective keeps the analysis both historically grounded and politically responsible.

6. Decolonising Security and Peacebuilding: Pathways to Transformative Practice

6.1. Epistemic transformation in security policy

Security policy is often built on the knowledge of a small group of experts. Change means wider participation in defining threats, planning responses and evaluating outcomes. African scholars, local practitioners, conflict-affected communities and indigenous knowledge holders can all contribute. The aim is not to replace one orthodoxy with another, but to create a dialogue in which every tradition can be questioned. The largest obstacle is habit: funding requirements, reporting templates and job specifications tend to favour familiar forms of expertise (Mbembe, 2021; Richmond, 2022).

6.2. Community-centred and human security approaches

Security strategies work better when they begin from first-hand experience of denial, exclusion, fear and violence. Mechanisms include community safety forums, local early warning networks, protection of civilians, and regular reporting channels through which residents can report abuses and receive responses. People trust institutions more when they see that reports are followed by action. Limiting factors include fear of retribution, poor communication, and security forces that regard community participation as interference (Autesserre, 2021; United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

6.3. Transforming institutions and governance

Security arrangements gain legitimacy by being accountable to the public. This means holding abusers to account, inclusive political representation, civilian control of the security forces, and access to justice. When institutions respond to complaints and publish the outcomes, citizens have reason to cooperate (Tyler, 2006). Barriers include vested interests, budget constraints and political leaders who benefit from weak oversight. Reform therefore needs broad support from courts, parliaments, media, civil society and others.

Small visible practices also contribute to trust. Examples include clear complaint procedures at police stations, a court explaining its decisions in a familiar language, or an elected representative reporting back to the village. Though they cost less than large reforms, such steps can change how people view authority.

6.4. Locally grounded conflict transformation

Community mediation, dialogue, restorative justice and customary practices can be combined with formal legal and political processes. They are often more familiar and closer to people. Everyday practices of cooperation can reduce violence, and these practices can be recognised and supported, as Mac Ginty (2021) demonstrates. The condition is that rights are protected. The voices of women, youth and minorities must not be limited in local processes, and there should be an accessible route of appeal to formal processes when an outcome is unfair.

6.5. Inclusive peacebuilding and the participation of marginalised groups

Inclusion is more than a seat in a room; it is influence over decisions. Women, youth, internally displaced persons, minority groups and other less visible groups can shape agendas, sit on negotiating teams and take part in monitoring. This participation has international backing through the Women, Peace and Security agenda and

the Youth, Peace and Security agenda, but their value depends on implementation. Bringing participants into programmes designed elsewhere makes inclusion symbolic. As Okech (2020) shows, African feminist thinkers have long called for participation grounded in local experience and equal power.

6.6. Economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable peace

Livelihoods, the distribution of resources, land and mineral management, and responses to climate pressure all play a part in peace. Development does not automatically bring peace. Tension can increase when a project benefits one group, displaces farmers or is dominated by a few. The issue is less who gets what than fairness and how disputes are handled. As Bhambra (2021) reminds us, economic arrangements have long histories, so fair development should examine who benefits from them. The United Nations Development Programme (2022) also recognises that environmental and human security are interrelated, and so climate-aware planning is part of peace work.

6.7. Partnerships and the politics of external support

International organisations, regional bodies, donors, governments and local organisations can work together without reproducing unequal authority. This requires local ownership, in which communities take part in setting goals and budgets. It demands two-way accountability, to communities and to donors. It requires flexible, longer-term funding that does not force local groups into short project cycles. Autesserre (2021) and Paffenholz (2021) both argue that long-term, flexible assistance is more beneficial than fixed schemes. The main obstacles are disparities in funding structures and incentives for a rapid return on investment.

7. Positioning the Framework: A Systematic Comparison with Established Approaches

7.1. Purpose and criteria of the comparison

A new framework must show how it differs from the approaches it draws on. This section compares the proposed framework with four established approaches: human security, liberal peacebuilding, critical (local-turn) peacebuilding, and conflict transformation. Decolonial scholarship, the fifth reference point, was compared internally in Section 3.7 and is included in Table 1 for completeness. The comparison uses five questions: what is assumed to be the object of security and peace; whose knowledge defines the problem; what theory of change is held; how colonial history and present-day political agency are treated; and what standard is used to judge local or customary practice. These are the questions on which the framework's own claims rest, and the criteria C1 to C5 from Section 1.6 govern what is carried over.

7.2. The established approaches in brief

Human security. Human security shifts the object of protection from the state to the individual, and it identifies threats across economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political domains (United Nations Development Programme, 1994; Commission on Human Security, 2003). Its strength is a people-centred agenda that is widely recognised in policy. Its limitations, noted by Paris (2001), include conceptual breadth that makes it hard to use analytically, and, from decolonial and critical perspectives, a tendency to leave open whose definition of threat prevails and how protection is to be delivered by institutions that may themselves be unaccountable.

Liberal peacebuilding. Liberal peacebuilding assumes that lasting peace follows from democratisation, market reform and the rule of law, usually supported by external actors (Paris, 2004). Paris (2010) defends the approach as capable of reform, while Richmond (2011) argues for a post-liberal peace that is more responsive to local legitimacy. Its strength lies in its attention to institutional design and the post-war security of states. Its limitations include the transfer of models and the weakness of local ownership documented by Autesserre (2021), and, for African contexts, the difficulty identified by Ake (1996) that institutions imported without popular roots can lack legitimacy. Sabaratnam (2017) shows how its assumptions can be Eurocentric.

Critical and local-turn peacebuilding. This literature moves attention to the everyday, the hybrid and the local (Mac Ginty, 2008; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Autesserre, 2021). It assumes that peace is shaped by

interaction between international and local actors, and that local agency should be central. It is the closest relative of the proposed framework, and its strengths are an account of local agency and everyday practice. Its limitations are that it can idealise the local, offers no explicit criterion for judging local practices against rights, and does not specify how local knowledge becomes institutional legitimacy (a point of critique from the standpoint of Mamdani, 1996).

Conflict transformation. Conflict transformation assumes that conflicts are changed through relationships and structures, through long-term processes involving actors at several levels (Lederach, 1997, 2003). It combines attention to relationships, structural change and local resources, and shares much with the proposed framework. It is less explicit about the colonial origins of present structures, about epistemic hierarchies between outsiders and insiders, and about measuring whether transformation has taken place.

Decolonial scholarship. As Section 3.7 showed, decolonial scholarship offers strong diagnoses of coloniality in power, knowledge and being (Quijano, 2000; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013), and has articulated epistemic pluralism as an aim (Santos, 2014). It is weakest on mechanisms of institutional change and on specifying what would count as evidence that decolonial transformation has improved peace.

7.3. Comparative table

Table 1 summarises the comparison. It records the central assumptions, explanatory strengths and limitations of each approach, and the contribution the proposed framework makes in relation to it.

Table 1. Comparison of the proposed framework with established approaches

Approach	Central assumptions	Explanatory strengths	Limitations	Distinctive contribution of the proposed framework
Human security	The individual is the primary object of protection; threats are multidimensional (economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, political).	People-centred agenda; broad policy recognition; links security to development.	Conceptually broad (Paris, 2001); silent on who defines threats and on the accountability of protecting institutions.	Adds a theory of whose knowledge defines threats (epistemic justice) and conditions under which protection becomes legitimate (accountable institutions).
Liberal peacebuilding	Peace follows democratisation, marketisation and rule of law, often externally supported.	Attention to institutional design and post-war state capacity.	Model transfer; weak local ownership; legitimacy deficits where institutions lack local roots.	Treats legitimacy as the product of participation and accountability, and treats the inherited structures as an object of historical analysis, not a neutral starting point.
Critical and local-turn peacebuilding	Peace is co-produced by international and local actors; everyday and hybrid practices matter.	Explains why external programmes miss local realities; values everyday agency.	Risk of idealising the local; no explicit rights criterion; limited account of how local input becomes institutional legitimacy.	Adds an explicit rights-based test for local practice (Dimension 3) and specifies the conditions under which participation is converted into legitimacy.
Conflict transformation	Conflict changes through relationships, structures and multi-level processes.	Combines relational repair with structural change; uses local resources.	Less explicit on colonial origins of structures, epistemic hierarchies, and measurement of transformation.	Adds historical and structural diagnosis (Dimension 1), African thought as a source of theory, and operational indicators.

Approach	Central assumptions	Explanatory strengths	Limitations	Distinctive contribution of the proposed framework
Decolonial scholarship	Coloniality persists in power, knowledge and being; epistemic pluralism is required.	Powerful diagnosis of hierarchy and knowledge politics.	Weak on institutional mechanisms and testability; risk of overextension or of treating the present as a product of the past alone.	Combines decolonial diagnosis with present-day political responsibility, specified mechanisms, and testable propositions.

7.4. Where the framework overlaps, and where it differs

The overlap with critical peacebuilding and conflict transformation is considerable, and the framework does not claim novelty for its concern with local agency, relationships or structural change. Its distinctiveness lies in five specific features, none of which is fully present in any one of the approaches in Table 1. First, it specifies a mechanism, the conversion of epistemic inclusion into legitimacy and trust, instead of treating inclusion as a good in itself. Second, it uses an explicit rights-based test to judge local and customary practices. Third, it follows a rule of attribution that requires both historical structure and present-day agency to be examined together, and so avoids both determinism and presentism. Fourth, it treats African intellectual traditions as sources of theory subject to internal critique, and not as cases or illustrations. Fifth, it is expressed in a form (variables, links, moderators and propositions) that allows empirical testing.

7.5. What the framework explains that existing approaches do not

The framework makes three explanatory claims in relation to puzzles that existing approaches describe but do not fully explain.

Why participatory and "locally owned" programmes often fail to generate legitimacy. The local-turn literature documents the failure of consultation that lacks influence (Autesserre, 2021). The framework explains it as a failure of conversion: epistemic inclusion produces legitimacy only when participants hold decision rights (meaningful participation) and when institutions are accountable for responding to what they hear. Inclusion without influence, or influence without accountability, is predicted to leave legitimacy unchanged.

Why customary and local peace practices produce such divergent outcomes. The literature on everyday peace and customary mechanisms emphasises their strengths (Mac Ginty, 2021; Zartman, 2000), while the political-institutional and feminist literatures stress their exclusions (Mamdani, 1996; Okech, 2020). The framework reconciles these accounts by predicting that outcomes depend on whether rights safeguards and accountability are present. Practices that operate with such safeguards should be more inclusive, and those without them should reproduce existing hierarchies.

Why some settlements are stable but not transformative. Liberal peacebuilding explains durable peace mainly through institutional strength. The framework adds that where historical and structural drivers such as land, exclusion and unequal political economy are left unexamined (Dimension 1), institutions may stabilise a settlement without changing the conditions that produced violence, leaving negative peace in place. This is a distinction between *stable* and *sustainable and transformative* peace, and it is testable.

8. An Integrated Conceptual Framework for Decolonial Social Transformation and Sustainable Peace

8.1. Rationale for an integrated framework

Perspectives taken alone are incomplete. Decolonial theory explains the relationship between knowledge and power but is less informative about institutional change. Peacebuilding research can describe processes and programmes but often treats local knowledge as an add-on. African thought offers moral and relational concepts that need to be linked to questions of structure and governance. What is missing, as Section 1.3 argued, is an account that connects epistemic justice, structural injustice, institutional legitimacy, community agency and

sustainable peace, and that states how they depend on one another. The framework below attempts to supply that account.

8.2. Core dimensions of the framework and their definitions

The framework has five connected dimensions. Each is defined below, together with what it includes and what it excludes. Table 2 lists the core question and illustrative observable indicators for each.

Dimension 1: Historical and structural analysis. *Definition:* the systematic identification of how colonial legacies and present-day arrangements of land, markets, borders and state institutions allocate security and insecurity among groups. *Includes:* historical origins of boundaries and land regimes, and the present decisions of governments, companies, armed groups and local elites that maintain or alter them. *Excludes:* purely descriptive history without a claim about present consequences, and explanations that attribute present insecurity to the past alone.

Dimension 2: Epistemic justice and knowledge plurality. *Definition:* the condition in which people affected by conflict are recognised as credible knowers whose accounts count as evidence in defining problems, setting priorities and judging success (Fricker, 2007). *Includes:* the recognition of academic, practical, oral and community knowledge on equal terms for assessment. *Excludes:* the uncritical acceptance of any source, since all knowledge claims remain open to challenge.

Dimension 3: Relational and ethical foundations. *Definition:* the shared commitments to dignity, reciprocity, reconciliation and mutual responsibility that shape how conflict is repaired, drawn from African ethics (Metz, 2022; Murithi, 2006) and bounded by rights safeguards. *Includes:* restorative approaches and communal obligation. *Excludes:* appeals to harmony that require victims to give up justice or individual rights (Gyekye, 1997).

Dimension 4: Institutional and political transformation. *Definition:* change in the formal and customary rules, accountability mechanisms, representation and power-sharing arrangements through which security and justice are delivered. *Includes:* civilian control, complaint redress, independent oversight and inclusive representation. *Excludes:* reform that changes organisational form without changing who is accountable to whom.

Dimension 5: Collective agency and peacebuilding practice. *Definition:* the capacity of communities and other actors to take part in the design, implementation, monitoring and maintenance of change, and to exercise real influence over decisions (Mac Ginty, 2021; Autesserre, 2021). *Includes:* locally led initiatives and community control of resources and knowledge. *Excludes:* participation limited to attendance or consultation without decision rights.

Table 2. The five dimensions: core questions and illustrative indicators

Dimension	Core question	Illustrative observable indicators
D1. Historical and structural analysis	Which inherited and present arrangements distribute insecurity, and who maintains them?	Documented land and boundary regimes; concentration of land and resource ownership; historical administrative arrangements still in force; decisions by current actors that sustain or change these arrangements.
D2. Epistemic justice and knowledge plurality	Whose knowledge defines the problem and the measures of success?	Inclusion of affected groups, disaggregated by gender, age, ethnicity and livelihood, in problem definition; use of local languages; community-generated evidence cited in planning documents; recorded design changes attributable to community input.

Dimension	Core question	Illustrative observable indicators
D3. Relational and ethical foundations	Does repair restore dignity and relationships without sacrificing rights?	Availability and use of appeal routes from customary to formal processes; representation of women and youth in customary forums; reported protection from retaliation; participants' perceptions of fairness.
D4. Institutional and political transformation	Are those who exercise security authority accountable to those affected?	Functioning complaint channels and their resolution rates; sanctions for abuse; civilian oversight; public reporting on how community input affected decisions.
D5. Collective agency and peacebuilding practice	Do affected people hold real influence over decisions, resources and evaluation?	Decision rights (binding or advisory); share of programme budget under community control; ability of marginalised groups to change outcomes; continuity of locally led initiatives after external support ends.

8.3. Interactions among the dimensions and necessity relations

The five dimensions are not interchangeable or symmetrical. This subsection states how they interact and which are necessary conditions, as propositions open to testing. Table 3 summarises these relations.

First, Dimension 1 is a *diagnostic and orienting condition*. It is not necessary for reducing violence in the short term, but it is necessary for peace that is *transformative* and not merely stable, because without a diagnosis of structural drivers, institutional strengthening can stabilise unjust arrangements. Second, Dimensions 2 and 4 are *jointly necessary for legitimacy, and neither is sufficient alone*. Epistemic justice without institutional channels produces symbolic participation, because affected people are heard but nothing binds decision makers. Institutional reform without epistemic justice produces technocratic reform that addresses the wrong problem. Third, Dimension 5 is the *enacting mechanism* between them. Collective agency converts recognition (Dimension 2) into pressure and participation within institutions (Dimension 4), and it is necessary for sustainability because change that is imposed without ownership is unlikely to outlast external support. Fourth, Dimension 3 is a *boundary condition* (a moderator). Peace of some kind can exist without it, but without rights safeguards and relational repair, the outputs of Dimensions 2 and 5 can reproduce exclusion, as when local forums are captured by elites.

Taken together, the claim is *configurational*: sustainable, rights-respecting and transformative peace requires a configuration in which all five dimensions are present at least to a threshold level, and a strong performance in one dimension cannot fully compensate for the absence of another. A strong Dimension 4 can produce a stable order without Dimension 2, but that order is predicted to be fragile and illegitimate. Proposition P5 (Section 8.7) turns this claim into a testable form.

Table 3. Interaction among dimensions and consequences of absence

Relationship	Type of relationship	Consequence if the condition is absent
D1 diagnostic analysis for the other dimensions	Orienting (necessary for transformative peace)	Interventions treat symptoms; settlements stabilise without changing structural drivers (stable, not sustainable, peace).
D2 together with D4	Jointly necessary for legitimacy	Without D2: technocratic reform that misdiagnoses the problem. Without D4: symbolic participation with no binding effect.
D5 linking D2 to D4	Enacting mechanism (mediator); necessary for sustainability	Recognition remains passive; reforms are imposed and collapse when external support ends.

Relationship	Type of relationship	Consequence if the condition is absent
D3 on D2, D4 and D5	Boundary condition (moderator)	Participation and local practices reproduce exclusion; customary forums are captured by elites; harmony is purchased at the cost of justice.
All five together	Configuration (conjunctural)	Peace may be stable, but is predicted to be illegitimate, exclusionary or fragile.

8.4. From framework to analytical model: constructs and operational definitions

To allow future researchers to operationalise and test the framework, its key terms are defined as variables. Table 4 gives, for each construct, a conceptual definition, illustrative indicators, and possible data sources. Figure 1 shows the model.

Table 4. Constructs, operational definitions and illustrative measurement

Construct (role)	Conceptual definition	Illustrative indicators	Data sources and level
X1. Epistemic justice (independent; Dimension 2)	The degree to which affected people's accounts are recognised as credible evidence in defining problems, setting priorities and judging outcomes.	Inclusion of affected groups in problem definition; community-generated evidence cited in plans; consultation in local languages; recorded design changes arising from community input.	Document analysis; observation of planning forums; interviews; participatory mapping. Programme or district level.
X2. Meaningful participation (independent or mediating; Dimension 5)	The extent to which affected people hold real influence over decisions on security priorities, resources and evaluation, as opposed to mere presence (Arnstein, 1969).	Decision rights (binding or advisory); share of budget under community control; ability of marginalised groups to alter outcomes.	Programme records; budget analysis; interviews; a participation scale adapted from Arnstein's ladder.
X3. Institutional legitimacy (mediating; Dimension 4)	Public belief that security and justice institutions have the right to exercise authority, based on procedural fairness, accountability and recognition (Tyler, 2006).	Perceived procedural fairness and impartiality across groups; willingness to report incidents and to cooperate; trust in police and courts.	Household surveys adapted from existing national barometer instruments; focus groups. Community level.
X4. Trust and cooperation (mediating)	Confidence between communities and local authorities, and between groups, together with the observable willingness to act on that confidence.	Voluntary information sharing; use of formal and agreed channels; participation in joint initiatives; inter-group trust items.	Surveys; behavioural indicators from administrative records; interviews.

Construct (role)	Conceptual definition	Illustrative indicators	Data sources and level
Y. Sustainable peace (outcome)	Non-recurrence of organised violence, with disputes handled through accepted non-violent channels, perceived safety across groups, and declining structural grievance.	Absence of violent recurrence over an agreed period; share of disputes resolved through accepted channels; perceived safety disaggregated by group; pending land and access-to-justice disputes; influence of marginalised groups.	Conflict event data; court and mediation records; surveys. District or settlement level.
M1. Rights safeguards (moderator; Dimension 3)	Formal and practical protection of individual and group rights within local and customary processes.	Appeal routes and their use; representation of women, youth and minorities in forums; reported retaliation.	Case records; interviews; observation of forums.
M2. Accountability mechanisms (moderator; Dimension 4)	Institutional capacity to receive, investigate and respond to complaints and to show how input influenced decisions.	Complaint channels and resolution rates; sanctions for abuse; civilian oversight; public feedback reports.	Administrative records; interviews; documents.
C. Constraints (negative moderators)	Conditions that block conversion of inclusion into influence.	Elite capture (share of positions or resources captured); tokenism (participation without decision rights); coercion (reported reprisals); extraction of community knowledge without consent or benefit.	Interviews; budget and appointment records; case studies.
D1. Historical and structural context (context and control)	Inherited and present arrangements that distribute insecurity.	Concentration of land ownership; colonial boundary and administrative legacies; present political settlement.	Historical and archival sources; land records; secondary literature.

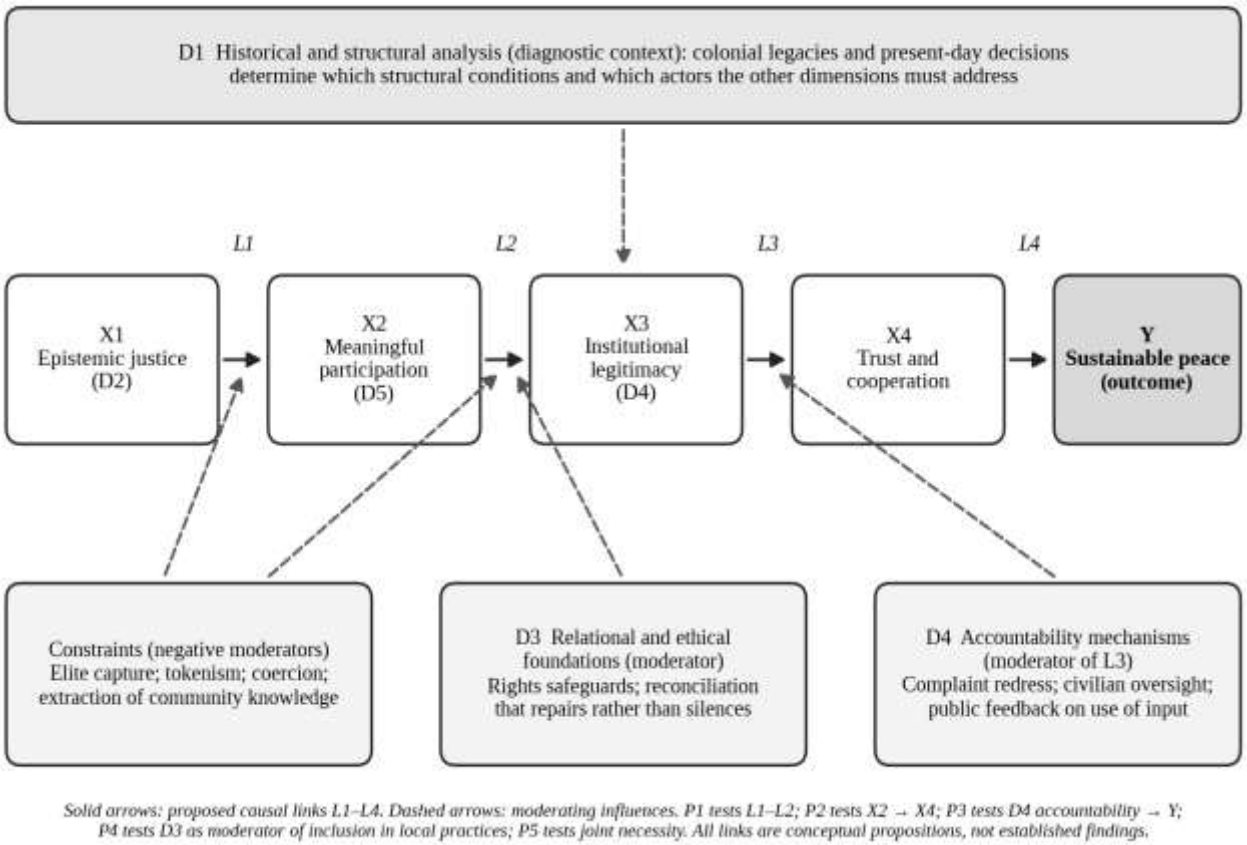


Figure 1. Analytical model of the framework: constructs, proposed causal links (L1–L4), moderators and constraints

8.5. Causal mechanisms, scope conditions and rival explanations

The links in Figure 1 are mechanisms, and each has scope conditions and a rival explanation. All are proposed and not proven.

L1: epistemic justice to meaningful participation. When affected people's accounts are treated as credible evidence, they are more likely to be given a role in decisions, because their testimony shapes how the problem is framed and who is seen as a legitimate participant. This link weakens where constraints such as tokenism or elite capture are present. A rival explanation is that donor requirements, and not epistemic recognition, drive inclusion.

L2: participation to institutional legitimacy. When participation carries influence, people see decisions as fairer and institutions as more entitled to authority (Tyler, 2006). The link depends on institutional follow-through: if key actors do not act on the results of a participatory process, it can fail. The principal rival explanation is performance (output) legitimacy: institutions may gain legitimacy from delivering services, whatever the level of participation.

L3: legitimacy to trust and cooperation. Legitimate institutions attract voluntary cooperation, such as reporting incidents and using formal channels. Accountability mechanisms (M2) moderate this link, because trust follows visible responses to complaints. A rival explanation is coercion: compliance may rest on fear and not on trust, which is why behavioural indicators should be paired with attitudinal ones.

L4: trust and cooperation to sustainable peace. Trust and cooperation allow disputes to be handled through trusted channels instead of force. This is helped by relational and ethical foundations of repair (Dimension 3) and made durable by institutional change (Dimension 4). Rival explanations include elite bargains and external guarantees that hold peace in place irrespective of local trust. If such peace persists without legitimacy or trust, it would be a case of stable but not sustainable peace in the sense defined above.

8.6. Enabling conditions and constraints

Several factors increase the likelihood that the proposed relationships hold. They include political will among leaders, adequate institutional capacity, inclusive leadership, access to resources, protection of rights, and a conflict environment calm enough for dialogue. Others stand in the way. Elite capture occurs when a small number of people deny others access to a process that is supposed to serve everyone. Tokenistic participation occurs when participation is invited but not heeded. Coercive institutions can punish those who speak. Without community control, the appropriation of indigenous knowledge can turn local knowledge into a resource for others. The protection of community ownership over knowledge is therefore a condition of fair practice in the framework, and these constraints are treated as negative moderators in the model.

8.7. Propositions for future research

The framework yields five propositions that later studies can examine. P1 to P4 state the core relationships of the model in Figure 1, with their variables and tests made explicit. P5 makes the necessity claim in Section 8.3 testable. Table 5 sets out each proposition with suggested designs and the evidence that would count against it.

P1. Where people affected by conflict take part in defining security priorities (X1, X2), they will regard security institutions as more legitimate (X3) than where priorities are set externally, other things being equal, including service delivery performance.

P2. Where communities have real influence over peace processes (X2), trust between communities and local authorities (X4) will grow more than where participation is advisory only.

P3. Where institutions are accountable to the public and open to complaint (M2), peace settlements are more likely to last (Y) than where they are not.

P4. Where local and customary practices are supported alongside rights safeguards (M1), they will include marginalised groups more than where they operate without such safeguards.

P5. Sustainable, rights-respecting peace (Y) will be present only where all five dimensions are present at least to a threshold level; configurations lacking Dimension 2 or Dimension 4 will yield stable but illegitimate or merely symbolic outcomes.

Table 5. Propositions, suggested designs and disconfirming evidence

No.	Variables	Suggested design and test	What would count against it
P1	X1 and X2 (independent); X3 (outcome); service delivery performance (control)	Compare districts or programmes that differ in participation but are similar in context (George & Bennett, 2005); household surveys of legitimacy plus document analysis of planning.	No difference in legitimacy once performance is controlled, or legitimacy tracks service delivery alone.
P2	X2 (independent: binding or advisory); X4 (outcome)	Longitudinal panel surveys before and after introducing decision rights; difference-in-differences where feasible; process tracing of mechanisms (Beach & Pedersen, 2019).	Equal trust gains under advisory participation, or no gains under binding participation.
P3	M2 (independent); Y (outcome); X3 as intermediate	Comparison of settlements or districts over time, using duration analysis or qualitative comparative analysis; supplement with process tracing.	Durable peace, including legitimacy and non-violent dispute handling, in the absence of accountability mechanisms.

P4	M1 (moderator); inclusion of women, youth and minorities in local practice (outcome)	Paired comparison of customary or community forums with and without appeal routes and representation; indicators include who brings cases, outcomes and perceived fairness.	No difference in inclusion, or safeguarded forums abandoned in favour of unsafeguarded ones.
P5	All five dimensions (conditions); Y (outcome)	Fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis on a medium-N set of cases (Ragin, 2008), with process tracing of deviant cases.	Cases with high Y where a dimension is clearly absent (necessity not supported).

8.8. Guidance on research design and measurement

Three cautions apply to any test of the framework. First, units of analysis should be stated (programme, district or settlement), as should the period for judging whether peace is sustained. Second, measurement should itself respect epistemic justice: indicators should be developed or validated with the communities studied, in the language of the people, so that the research does not reproduce the hierarchy it criticises. Third, no single method is adequate. The propositions call for a combination of surveys, comparative case studies, configurational analysis and process tracing, and they should be tested in contexts where the framework is expected to fail as well as where it is expected to succeed.

8.9. The framework's contribution to social transformation scholarship

The framework contributes in three ways. First, it widens the scope of peace work beyond preventing conflict or maintaining institutional stability to altering the conditions that can create conflict. Second, it integrates knowledge, power, social relations and institutions into a single account with specified links, where earlier research has tended to treat them separately. Third, it uses African ideas as sources of theory and not as cultural illustrations, and it does not hesitate to criticise them. It can be read alongside Paffenholz (2021), who explores continuing peace processes, and Richmond (2022), who considers the design of the international peace system. The framework is also suitable for teaching. A case can be read using the five dimensions as a checklist, asking which dimension is strongest, which is missing, and what this implies for the long-term prospects of peace.

9. Critical Discussion: Tensions, Contradictions, and Limits of Decolonial Peacebuilding

9.1. Avoiding the romanticisation of African traditions

Customary institutions can be portrayed as mild and harmonious, but their history is more complex. They can settle disputes satisfactorily, and they can also preserve privilege. As Mamdani (1996) shows, some customary authority was strengthened and reshaped by colonial administration, so "tradition" cannot simply be assumed to be authentic. Their performance should be assessed on outcomes: whether they defend rights, share power equitably and give space to marginalised voices. Metz (2022) treats African ethics as a set of ideas to be discussed and developed, which invites critical reading.

9.2. Navigating universal rights and contextual legitimacy

Local autonomy and international norms, national constitutions and human rights can pull in opposite directions. One error is to take all outside intervention at face value. The opposite error is to assume that every local practice is just. One way forward is to see rights as a shared responsibility of communities and external actors, to be defined and protected in varied ways. This requires dialogue and not hasty responses.

In practice, this means communities have a say in how rights are interpreted and exercised, while basic rights, such as protection from violence and equal access to the rule of law, are upheld. External supporters need to listen first and to accept that the language of rights can also be local. A tension remains and should be stated openly. The framework values consensus and relational repair (Wiredu, 1996; Murithi, 2006), yet its rights

safeguards (Dimension 3) may in some cases override a community's consensus. The framework resolves this by giving the rights safeguard priority over consensus where basic rights are at stake, and by treating the interpretation of those rights as an ongoing, participatory process (Gyekye, 1997). Critics may reasonably contest where that line should be drawn, and that contestation is part of the dialogue the framework calls for.

9.3. Decoloniality and contemporary political responsibility

It can be too easy to blame present insecurity on colonial history and so to excuse current leaders. Every day, elites, governments, armed groups, companies and others make decisions that perpetuate or contest unequal structures. For this reason, the framework joins historical analysis with political responsibility. Decoloniality is not limited to critique of the past, and requires action in the present, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) makes clear.

9.4. Epistemic plurality and the risk of new exclusions

When we call for many forms of knowledge, how can they coexist and relate to one another without one voice dominating? One group, region or authority can claim to speak for all Africans and marginalise others. Plural knowledge requires plural decision making, and rules that preserve disagreement and protect minorities. Epistemic plurality must therefore go hand in hand with democratic participation.

9.5. Limits of the framework and of conceptual approaches

A conceptual article cannot demonstrate that the framework works. It provides a way of thinking and a set of propositions, and it does not measure impacts. Several specific limits follow. First, the framework overlaps substantially with critical peacebuilding and conflict transformation (Section 7.4), and its added value rests on the five features identified there, which only empirical work can confirm. Second, the causal order in Figure 1 may be contested: legitimacy and trust may also encourage participation, so reverse causation and feedback loops are likely, and research designs should allow for them. Third, the operational indicators in Tables 2 and 4 are illustrative and will need adaptation to local contexts, and standardised indicators could themselves reproduce the epistemic hierarchy the framework criticises. Fourth, the threshold levels in Proposition P5 are not specified here and should be determined through comparative research. Until such work is completed, the framework should be used as a guide to inquiry. Epistemic inclusion, community agency and institutional accountability can be tested through comparative case studies, field research and long-term follow-up of communities to establish whether they contribute to more durable peace.

10. Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

10.1. Implications for scholarship

African intellectual traditions, historical analysis, epistemic justice and conflict transformation can be combined in a single research design. Questions that can be asked include: Who determines what security is in a particular context? What criteria do residents use to assess an institution's legitimacy? Which local practices support peace, and whom do they serve? The five propositions in Section 8.7 provide a starting point for testing. Research with local researchers as co-authors, and not only as assistants, can also improve the quality and fairness of the work (Mbembe, 2021).

10.2. Implications for security governance

Security institutions can benefit from threat assessments based on local information, community participation in planning, and accountability for wrongdoing. These measures can help rebuild trust where it has been lost. Consultation should not become a box-ticking exercise, and information on how community views influenced decisions should be made public (United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

Regional institutions can also contribute by circulating examples of community-based security practices from countries in the region, and by asking governments to share how they respond to community concerns. Such exchange allows each state to learn from the others without copying any single model.

10.3. Implications for peacebuilding practice

Peacebuilding organisations can put a few simple questions to their programmes. Are local objectives set with the participation of local people? Would those people consider the work valid? Can women, young people and minorities influence decisions? What is the social effect after the project ends? These questions invite practitioners to look beyond the immediate product, in keeping with Autesserre's (2021) emphasis on everyday relationships and presence in the local context. The five dimensions in Table 2 can also be used as a planning and evaluation checklist.

10.4. Implications for education and knowledge production

African scholarship can be integrated into mainstream subjects in universities and training centres, partnerships can be established in which Africans lead research agendas, and students can be taught to compare ideas from different traditions critically. This helps develop practitioners who understand both international discourse and local realities. It also lets readers use this article as a study tool: compare the claims of the different authors, and ask what evidence would test them.

10.5. Priorities for future research

Comparative and context-sensitive studies in African settings should be carried out. Topics include community-based peacebuilding, post-conflict institutional reform, community legitimacy and security governance, and social trust. Studies should also attend to gender, age and regional differences, and should report where the framework does not apply as well as where it does. Such research would be most useful if it involved the communities studied, communicated its findings in the language of the people, and gave them the opportunity to dispute the findings from their own experience.

11. Conclusion: Reimagining Sustainable Peace through Social Transformation

Security should not be defined only by the absence of armed violence and the stability of institutions. Sustainable peace in African societies also depends on how historical injustice, unequal power, social exclusion, institutional fragility and lost trust in authority are addressed. Social transformation can serve as a starting point for addressing these interrelated issues, by asking what security means and what peaceful coexistence might look like when the influence of power, knowledge, institutions and social relations is taken into account.

Decolonial perspectives provide a critical analysis of the historical and current institutions that determine who is protected, who knows, and who experiences what. African intellectual traditions and community practices add dignity, responsibility, reconciliation, collective welfare and participatory approaches to resolving conflict. Their value does not lie in replacing one dominant framework with another, but in opening space for meaningful interaction between different knowledge systems and experiences. That engagement should be critical of practices that reproduce discrimination, marginalise communities or violate individual rights. To understand insecurity today, colonial history and cultural tradition must be studied together with present governance and political decisions, economic conditions, and the actions of institutions and communities.

These perspectives have been integrated in a framework of five interrelated dimensions: historical and structural analysis, epistemic justice, relational and ethical foundations, institutional and political transformation, and collective agency. The article has specified each dimension, stated how they interact and which are necessary conditions, and expressed the framework as an analytical model with operational definitions and five propositions that future research can test.

The framework explains three things that existing approaches describe but do not fully explain. It explains why participatory and locally owned programmes often fail to produce legitimacy: inclusion produces legitimacy only when it carries decision rights and meets accountable institutions. It explains why customary and local practices have such divergent outcomes: they depend on whether rights safeguards and accountability are present. And it explains why some settlements are stable but not transformative: where historical and structural drivers are left unexamined, institutions can stabilise a settlement without changing the conditions that produced

violence. These are the points on which the framework differs from human security, liberal peacebuilding, critical peacebuilding and conflict transformation (Table 1).

These claims remain conceptual. The article has not tested them, and it has distinguished throughout between conceptual arguments and empirically established findings. The suggested linkages need to be examined in varied social and political settings to establish their applicability and explanatory value, using the designs outlined in Section 8.7. For practice, security institutions and governments should increase accountability, respect human rights, respond to grievances, and ensure fair access to justice and public resources. Peacebuilding organisations and external partners should draw on community knowledge, involve communities in programme design, implementation and evaluation, and ensure that priorities are community-led. Women, young people, displaced persons, minorities and other marginalised groups should be genuinely included in decisions that affect their security and wellbeing. Local and traditional practices of conflict management should be safeguarded, and reconciliation should not be built on the sacrifice of justice, equality or individual rights.

Sustainable peace is not a one-time event. It is an ongoing process of changing unequal structures, building accountable institutions, valuing different kinds of knowledge, mending social relations and enabling communities to act meaningfully in defining their future together.

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