Utilization of the New Public Governance Approach to Conflict Management: A Case Study of the Border Communities in Southern-Gambia.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the application of the New Public Governance (NPG) approach to conflict management in the border communities of Southern Gambia, where persistent land disputes, resource scarcity, and political tensions undermine local stability and development. The main aim is to investigate how NPG principles-emphasizing inclusive participation, networked governance, and bottom-up accountability-can offer a context-specific and sustainable framework for conflict management in fragile borderland contexts.

A qualitative case study design was employed, with data collected from 35 community members and 30 security officials in Brikama LGA and neighbouring border areas through interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic framework, supported by NVivo 15, guided the analysis.

Findings indicate that NPG enhances conflict management by integrating indigenous mechanisms, such as joking relationships (sanankuyaa, Jola-Fula-Serer), which foster cohesion, humour, and respect. Cross-border collaboration through joint patrols, training, and harmonized protocols builds trust and strengthens coordination among stakeholders. Community perceptions highlight that participatory dialogue, peace education, and cultural practices reinforce inter-ethnic cohesion, reconciliation, and shared identity. Strategies to strengthen NPG include improved infrastructure, secure communication, early warning systems, and livelihood initiatives such as cross-border markets and youth/women empowerment. Multi-level adaptive governance and hybrid councils further institutionalize inclusive conflict transformation. Despite these benefits, challenges persist, including complex socio-political dynamics, capacity gaps among traditional leaders, and uneven resource distribution, which limits the full realization of NPG's potential.

This study is motivated by a critical research gap while prior research has examined conflict in the Senegambia borderlands; limited attention has been given to how a governance framework like NPG can operationalize local cultural mechanisms for sustainable conflict transformation. Addressing this gap can provide evidence-based strategies for policymakers, practitioners, and community actors to enhance peacebuilding in fragile border contexts.

Keywords: New Public Governance, conflict management, border communities, Senegambia, indigenous mechanisms, participatory governance, cross-border collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

The Gambia's southern border settlements in the West Coast Region (WCR) and Senegal's Casamance area represent a socio-cultural continuum characterized by shared linguistic, cultural, and traditional political

affinities among ethnic groups such as the Fula, Mandinka, Serer, and Jola (Bayo, 1977). Despite these deep-rooted connections, the region remains a hotspot of intermittent tensions and complex border disputes. Key Gambian border posts-Giboro and Omorto in Kombo East, Kartong in Kombo South, and Darsilameh and Dimbaya in Kombo Central-serve as important points of interaction between the two countries. Yet, contested spaces such as Touba-Tranquil, claimed by residents to be part of Senegal, illustrate the persistence of boundary ambiguities and the fragility of cross-border relations. The Gambia–Casamance border, therefore, encapsulates the historical, political, and socio-economic challenges that have long shaped intercommunal relations and governance in the region (Nugent, 2007).Niang (2013) observes that the persistence of tensions along this border is largely due to weak coordination between Gambian and Senegalese authorities, compounded by divergent administrative structures, poor communication, and historical mistrust. These factors have limited the development of a coherent framework for conflict management and sustainable peacebuilding. In multi-ethnic settlements such as Darsilameh, Giboro-Koto, and Dimbaya, long-standing grievances over land ownership, access to resources, and political representation continue to escalate conflicts, highlighting the need for more inclusive and participatory approaches to governance.

The New Public Governance (NPG) paradigm (Osborne, 2010) offers an innovative framework for addressing these cross-border challenges. Unlike the hierarchical and bureaucratic nature of traditional public administration or the efficiency-oriented focus of New Public Management (NPM), NPG emphasizes collaboration, inclusivity, and participatory decision-making. It advocates for the integration of diverse actors-including local communities, traditional authorities, government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private sector entities-in governance and conflict management processes. Within the context of borderland dynamics, NPG promotes decentralized and cooperative mechanisms that reflect local realities and empower communities to take ownership of peacebuilding initiatives.

The long-standing disputes between Touba-Tranquil in Senegal and Gambian villages such as Darsilameh, Giboro-Koto, and Dimbaya are deeply rooted in overlapping ethnic identities, historical rivalries, and contested land claims. The emergence of the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) in the 1990s further destabilized the region, resulting in population displacement and economic disruption (Niang, 2013). More recently, the deployment of Senegalese forces under the ECOMIG peacekeeping mission in 2017 has intensified sovereignty concerns among Gambian border communities, contributing to mistrust and weakening social cohesion. These dynamics have significant implications for peace, security, and development, particularly by constraining cross-border trade and cooperation.

Within this context, the NPG framework offers a pathway toward more sustainable conflict management by fostering shared responsibility among multiple stakeholders. By promoting dialogue, inclusion, and local participation, it seeks to address the structural and relational causes of conflict rather than merely managing their outcomes. This participatory orientation resonates with global trends in governance and peacebuilding, which emphasize locally, led solutions and trust-building in fragile border environments.

Institutionally, The Gambia has established several key agencies to manage its borders and ensure national security. The Gambia Immigration Department (GID), created by Act No. 2 of 1965, regulates migration and border control (Jallow, 2018). The Customs Department (established in 2004) safeguards economic interests through trade regulation and revenue collection (Touray, 2020). The Gambia Armed Forces, founded under Sections 186–187 of the 1997 Constitution, defend territorial sovereignty and assist civil authorities, while the State Intelligence Service (SIS), created by Decree 45/1995, focuses on intelligence and counterintelligence operations. The Ministry of Defence oversees strategic coordination of defense policies (Njie, 2021), and the Ministry of Lands and Regional Government manages land administration and regional development (Baldeh, 2019).

Collectively, these institutions-when guided by the principles of New Public Governance—can foster collaboration, transparency, and community engagement. Such an approach holds promise for transforming the Gambia–Casamance border from a zone of recurring tension into a model of cooperative governance, peace, and sustainable development.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

This section reviews key concepts; conflict management, New Public Governance and public administration, alongside relevant theories that inform the study.

Conflict Management

Conflict management is viewed as a process addressing situations where groups compete for scarce resources necessary for survival. Scholars such as Maslow, Burton, and Wallensteen define conflict through elements of incompatibility, action, and actors, emphasizing how unmet human needs and competing goals often trigger hostilities (Oishi, 2016). Bartos and Wehr (2002) further describe conflict as adversarial behaviour driven by incompatible objectives and emotional hostility. The concept extends beyond containing violence to include addressing root causes such as inequality and injustice. Rubenstein (2011) and Hamad (2011) note that while conflict management seeks to prevent escalation, it also promotes systems for peaceful engagement and transformation. Non-violent strategies-dialogue, negotiation, and compromise-are crucial, and third-party interventions (mediation, arbitration, and peacekeeping) play vital roles in facilitating these processes (Chareonwongsak, 2018; Amer, 2016). At the international level, institutions like the UN support state-led conflict management, emphasizing diplomacy and cooperation (Oishi, 2016).

The New Public Governance

New Public Governance (NPG) represents a shift from traditional hierarchical administration and market-driven New Public Management toward a more inclusive, collaborative, and network-based model of governance. Rooted in social work and organizational sociology, NPG emphasizes stakeholder engagement, co-production of solutions, and the interdependence of actors across public, private, and civil society sectors (Osborne, 2006; 2010). It promotes partnerships and "self-organizing, inter-organizational networks" (Rhodes, 1997) that enable shared decision-making, resource pooling, and policy innovation-crucial in addressing complex challenges like border conflicts.

Unlike earlier models that prioritized control or efficiency, NPG highlights dialogue, negotiation, and participation as mechanisms for achieving collective outcomes. It views governance as a process involving diverse institutions-government bodies, NGOs, businesses, and communities-working together to enhance public service delivery and policy implementation (Xu et al., 2015; Sawaneh, 2021). Citizen governance, an integral aspect of NPG, reflects the public's active role in managing societal issues through partnerships and agreements beyond formal government structures. By fostering inclusivity, accountability, and trust, NPG seeks to align public interests with shared governance practices. Overall, it provides a flexible framework suited to managing multidimensional issues like cross-border conflicts through participatory and cooperative approaches.

Public Administration

Public Administration encompasses the activities and institutions through which governments implement policies, deliver public services, and uphold the rule of law. It operates within a political environment, distinguishing it from private administration, and emphasizes the execution of legislative mandates through legally established bodies (Shafritz et al., 2017). As both a practice and an academic discipline, public administration studies how management principles apply in the public sector while incorporating insights from law, political science, sociology, and business. Originating with Woodrow Wilson's The Study of Administration (1887), the field evolved into a distinct discipline in the 20th century, reflecting changing roles of governance in a globalized world (Shafritz et al., 2022).

The discipline promotes transparency, fairness, accountability, and the ethical pursuit of public values (Rosenbloom & Chanin, 2017). While rooted in bureaucratic models emphasizing hierarchy, efficiency, and professionalism, traditional public administration also limited citizen participation, casting individuals as passive "clients" dependent on state services (Callahan, 2006). However, modern public administration recognizes the need for adaptability, sustainability, and innovation in service delivery-whether through public agencies, private

contractors, or nonprofit organizations. Its central challenge lies in balancing efficiency with democratic values, ensuring that governance structures remain responsive, ethical, and oriented toward public interest amid evolving political and societal demands.

Empirical Review

The New Public Governance (NPG) paradigm emerged as an evolution of Public Governance and New Public Management, emphasizing inclusivity, pluralism, and collaboration among diverse governance actors such as governments, private sectors, NGOs, and civil society groups (Xu et al., 2015). NPG promotes participatory governance, decentralization, and multi-level cooperation across local, regional, and global structures, aligning public administration with modern societal changes like globalization, informatization, and marketization. It advocates for equitable decision-making, transparency, and networked interaction among actors, moving beyond hierarchical and monopolistic state control toward shared authority and citizen engagement.

Empirical studies demonstrate both the potential and limitations of NPG in managing complex conflicts. Examples include the Ethiopia–Eritrea conflict, where external mediation lacked sustained collaboration (Abbink, 2003), and the South China Sea dispute, where multilateral negotiations under ASEAN–China frameworks reflect partial NPG principles but are hindered by power asymmetries (Thayer, 2011). The Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland exemplifies successful collaborative governance fostering inclusivity and trust (O'Flynn, 2007), while environmental management in the Colorado River Basin illustrates NPG in sustainable resource cooperation (Schlager & Heikkila, 2011).

In West Africa, the protracted Casamance conflict in Senegal, shaped by colonial border legacies and ethnic fragmentation, reveals weak governance coordination and limited citizen participation (Bayo, 1977; Evans & Ray, 2013). Applying NPG principles-through networked peacebuilding, participatory dialogue, and regional collaboration-offers a pathway for addressing cross-border conflicts, particularly between The Gambia and Senegal's Casamance region.

Traditional African conflict management systems are community-driven frameworks rooted in dialogue, consensus, and reconciliation, aimed at preserving social harmony and restoring relationships rather than punishing offenders (Zartman, 2018). Elders, chiefs, and spiritual leaders play central roles as mediators and negotiators, using customary laws and cultural rituals-such as libations, oaths, and palavers to ensure fairness, forgiveness, and accountability. Examples like Rwanda's Gacaca courts and Uganda's Mato Oput process demonstrate the strength of traditional methods in promoting communal healing, reconciliation, and local ownership of justice. These approaches are cost-effective, culturally legitimate, and accessible, especially in rural or post-conflict settings.

However, traditional mechanisms face limitations. They often exclude women and youth, lack consistency across regions, and struggle with large-scale or politicized conflicts. Their reliance on moral authority can hinder enforcement, while biases, elite influence, and contradictions with statutory laws-such as in Cameroon or Somalia-undermine credibility (Ghebretekle & Rammala, 2018). To address these weaknesses, judicial interventions and hybrid mechanisms have gained prominence. Judicial approaches, including the International Court of Justice (ICJ), provide legality and impartiality but are slow, expensive, and sometimes unenforceable-as shown in the Western Sahara dispute (Sone, 2016). Hybrid methods, combining mediation, arbitration, and judicial processes, balance inclusivity with legal rigor, though they require strong coordination and resources, as demonstrated by the African Union Border Programme (Adegbonmire, 2015).

Emerging frameworks like the New Public Governance (NPG) model offer a collaborative alternative by emphasizing inclusivity, multi-stakeholder engagement, and shared power (Osborne, 2010). NPG's network-based approach fosters dialogue between governments, civil society, and communities, addressing local grievances in complex border conflicts such as The Gambia-Casamance region. Despite its potential for participatory and adaptive conflict management, NPG faces challenges of accountability gaps, power asymmetries, and weak institutional capacity-factors that must be strengthened for effective and sustainable peacebuilding.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework provides a structured guide for researchers, helping to formulate hypotheses, select methodologies, and link findings to established theories (Adom, Hussein & Agyem, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Conflict Transformation Theory, developed by John Paul Lederach (1995, 2003), focuses on addressing the root causes of conflict through long-term, culturally grounded, and relationship-centered approaches. Unlike traditional conflict resolution, it seeks to transform social structures, relationships, and discourses that sustain conflict, emphasizing inclusivity, local ownership, and indigenous knowledge, such as joking relationships among the Jola, Serer, Fula, and Kaabunka. Multi-track diplomacy and integration with New Public Governance (NPG) principles-participatory decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and decentralized governance-enhance legitimacy and sustainability of peace processes. Evidence from Northern Ghana and Casamance shows culturally informed, governance-integrated models are effective. The proposed Community-Based Conflict Transformation Model for the Gambia-Casamance border aligns Lederach's theory with local practices and NPG, offering a culturally legitimate, participatory, and systemic approach to sustainable peacebuilding.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study examined the application of the New Public Governance (NPG) approach to conflict management in the border communities of Southern Gambia-specifically Darsilameh, Giboro Koto, and Dimbaya. Findings indicate that while NPG principles of collaboration, inclusiveness, and multi-actor engagement have contributed to enhanced cross-border governance and security, their effectiveness is contingent upon structural, institutional, and socio-political factors.

Joint patrols between Gambian and Senegalese security forces illustrate the potential of NPG to foster cooperation, trust, and coordinated security management. Regular mixed patrols and intelligence-sharing meetings have mitigated smuggling and petty crime while promoting mutual understanding, reflecting similar successes in other West African border regions (Mbumega & Cyril, 2019). Community engagement mechanisms, including "border watch" boxes, SMS sharing, and village meetings, strengthened intelligence gathering and reduced fear of reprisals, demonstrating that legitimacy and trust are critical for governance effectiveness. However, these successes are not uniform: bureaucratic, cultural and colonial language differences between The Gambia's and Senegal's administrative systems, along with political interference and elite dominance, significantly undermine efficiency and impartiality. Standardizing reporting formats, decision-making procedures, and disciplinary measures emerges as a key requirement for sustaining collaborative governance.

While participants from the three communities reported fewer violent incidents and increased confidence in law enforcement due to visible joint patrols, inclusivity remains limited. Youth and women frequently feel excluded from decision-making, reflecting broader governance challenges observed in Niger's Agadez region (Bradley & Erdilmen, 2023). Furthermore, the dominance of elite actors in cross-border coordination reduces perceived fairness, and discrepancies between Gambian common law and Senegalese civil law complicate joint enforcement, constraining NPG's collaborative potential (Gilbert & Pasque, 2023). These findings underscore that NPG is not a universally applicable solution; its success relies heavily on local institutional, legal, and cultural contexts.

Strengthening NPG implementation in these border communities requires both technical and institutional interventions. Cross-border cooperation can be enhanced through joint training, harmonized protocols, and intelligence-sharing, as observed along the Kenya-Uganda border (Mkutu, 2008). Investment in infrastructure, communications, and early warning systems improves state visibility and responsiveness, while integrating traditional practices, such as joking relationships (sanankuyaa) and community dialogues, aligns with Lederach's (1997) conflict transformation framework, ensuring culturally resonant peacebuilding. Economic initiatives, including cross-border markets and youth employment programs, reduce grievances and foster interdependence (Charles, 2012). A multi-level governance model linking local peace committees, national institutions, and ECOWAS frameworks can support adaptive, coherent regional responses (Okpara, 2020).

Despite these opportunities, several institutional weaknesses limit NPG's full potential. Inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, limited technology, and fragmented authority perpetuate inefficiency (Korf & Emmers, 2019). Out-dated colonial boundaries, weak communication networks, and rigid legal systems further constrain effective cross-border governance. Bureaucratic silos, elite interference, and insufficient digital tools hinder real-time coordination (Andreas & Nadelmann, 2006; Newman, 2006). Additionally, neglecting community feedback and failing to adapt to evolving smuggling and security dynamics undermine the sustainability of NPG-based interventions. Therefore, while NPG provides a promising framework, its application in Southern Gambia's borderlands requires deliberate attention to institutional reform, local adaptation, and sustained capacity-building.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how the New Public Governance (NPG) framework has been implemented in managing cross-border conflicts in the Gambia–Casamance region, focusing on cooperation, inclusivity, institutional coordination, and community participation. The findings indicate that while notable progress has been made, challenges remain in achieving full alignment between NPG principles and the complex realities of border governance.

A major success has been the improvement in cross-border cooperation. Joint security patrols, intelligence sharing, and harmonized operational procedures between Gambian and Senegalese authorities have reduced misunderstandings and improved stability. These efforts highlight how NPG's collaborative approach can build trust and institutional synergy across national boundaries.

The study also found increased community participation in peacebuilding processes. Through traditional mechanisms such as joking relationships and participatory dialogue forums, communities are taking an active role in resolving disputes and fostering social cohesion. This bottom-up engagement reflects the NPG emphasis on inclusivity and shared governance, marking a gradual move away from centralized, state-dominated conflict management.

Furthermore, institutional coordination has improved through the creation of cross-border committees and joint decision-making platforms that facilitate dialogue and policy consistency. Complementary socio-economic initiatives, including youth and women empowerment programs and cross-border trade activities, have addressed local grievances while strengthening interdependence and peacebuilding.

However, structural and political barriers-such as colonial administrative legacies, resource constraints, weak infrastructure, and centralized governance-continue to hinder the full realization of NPG's potential. These limitations underscore the need for deeper institutional reforms and sustainable resource investment.

To conclude, the study concludes that the objectives were successfully met. While NPG has advanced cooperation and community involvement, its overall impact remains constrained by systemic challenges. The research partially supports Proposition I and rejects Proposition II, confirming that NPG fosters participatory governance and enhances community acceptance in cross-border conflict management.

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