

Youth Agency in Peacebuilding: an Account of Mombasa County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Global experience with sustainable peacebuilding has been diverse since the term was formally introduced to the world by the United Nations in 1992. Various and diverse attempts have been made at sustainable peacebuilding involving different stakeholders. African youths have become important stakeholders in the peacebuilding agenda because they occupy multiple roles in violence: as belligerents, victims and targets of violence, but more importantly as actors for peace. Their involvement has been momentous, as exemplified by the 2020 African Union Continental Framework for Youth, Peace and Security. In Kenya, similar efforts have been made and the Government has produced the Kenya Youth Development Policy (2019) which places youth at the center of peacebuilding. Despite these efforts, the potential for sustainable peacebuilding through youth involvement has not been fully understood. It is against this backdrop that this study sought to establish youth agency in peacebuilding as a critical development in Kenya's peace agenda, focusing on Mombasa County. In so doing, it assesses various strategies adopted to incorporate the youth in peacebuilding initiatives. The findings of this study provide not only a County youth framework on peacebuilding but also a nationwide outlook on youth agency in peacebuilding.

Key Words: Peacebuilding, Youth Agency

INTRODUCTION

The engagement of youth as agents in peacebuilding is not new in the history of peace and conflict management. Youth are at once the perpetrators of conflict and also the ambassadors of peace when given a chance. Del Felice and Wisler (2007) in a research paper on the potential of youth as peacebuilders argue that youth have the unique power and potential to affect social change, including in matters of peace, given the opportunity. Irrespective of where they are, youth are indiscriminately affected by direct, cultural and structural forms of violence. Del Felice and Wisler (2007) raise an important point about youth and conflict, arguing that youth are fundamentally affected by this culture of violence transferred, and sometimes popularised, across national borders through print, media and information technology. Much of the radicalisation that the youth face today has been accessed through popular media, and yet this link has not been fully understood (Awan, 2007; Botha 2015; Seraphin *et al* 2017;).

The unanimous adoption of UNSCR 2250 on Youth and Peace in 2015 was a rare event in which the United Nations Security Council acted in one accord to recognise the importance of youth in peace and security. Youths play a pivotal role in peacebuilding and yet, review after review seems to suggest that youth have always been put aside or as Ozerdem (2016) argues, "othered" in peacebuilding discourse, thereby denying them the opportunity to contribute to peacebuilding. In this matter, they are seen as potentially dangerous 'subjects' and policy approaches often regard them as 'a problem', and "enfants terribles" rather than part of the solution, and are constrained by narrow social constructs (Ozerdem, 2016; Berents and Mollica, 2020). Maina (2012) in a report titled *Opportunity or Threat: The Engagement of Youth in African Societies Africa*, argues

that the view of the "youth bulge" as a problem rather than an asset may damage the potential that youth have in peacebuilding as exemplified by the peacebuilding work done by youth in Liberia. Literature is replete with examples of positive youth contribution to peacebuilding. Agbioba (2015) has argued in the case of Nigeria and Northern Mali that Sahelian youth are coping with peacebuilding challenges and innovating approaches to peacebuilding in order to increase their social agency in peacebuilding and development in their local communities.

The contribution of Kenya's youth in peacebuilding has been overshadowed by research that focused mostly on the role of young people as victims and perpetrators of violence. Youth have engaged in the arts and theatre to spread peacebuilding messages. For example, the Tegla Lorupe Foundation for Peace, Nakuru youth-led Maisha Initiative, the Kibera Hamlets, and Kibera Walls for Peace (KHKWP), the Manyatta Youth Resource Centre (MYRC) in Kisumu are all innovative youth-led peacebuilding programs. The MYRC community center promotes sustainable empowerment projects among the youth through sports development, and music talent promotion, including homegrown solutions to local security challenges (Edith *et al*, 2019). These activities are however uncoordinated and do not therefore amount to a comprehensive youth peacebuilding agenda.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In 1975, Galtung coined the term "peacebuilding" in his pioneering work "Three Approaches to Peace: Peacekeeping, Peacemaking, and Peacebuilding. According to Galtung, conflicts erupt because of the failure to meet basic human need, not because of scarcity but because of bad policies which introduce inequity in society and perpetuate structural violence. In this situation, peace would then represent the reduction or removal the deleterious impact of these bad policies. Peace according to Galtung has a structure which, if applied correctly should address the root causes conflict and build the way to sustainable peacebuilding, as such the issue of youth agency in peacebuilding can be enhanced through sound policies tailored towards addressing the plight of the youth.

As a conceptual construct, youth have been portrayed as apathetic perpetrators of violence to be feared and controlled. At the same time recent literature on youth in post-conflict societies highlight their agency and connect youth directly to peacebuilding efforts (Ozerdem, 2016). Berents and McEvoy-Levy (2015) argue that youth agency is influenced by the everyday struggles that they go through, including the need to conform to expected social norms. Youth often mobilise through large-scale social movements as has been seen through youth-led initiatives such as the Arab Spring (Campante and Chor, 2012) and the One Million Voices Against FARC that took place in Colombia in 2008, which was largely orchestrated by youth.

STUDY AREA

This research was done in Mombasa County. The county was selected because of the persistent land-based and ethnic conflicts as well as youth marginalization that has been witnessed in the County, and which, unlike other parts of Kenya, has the potential of internationalising domestic conflict due to the emerging illicit drug trafficking and the advent of international terrorism that have both taken root in the County (Onguny, 2019; Rakodi *et al*. 2000; Botha, 2014). The study population was the Youth. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design and applied both convenience and purposive sampling techniques. A sample size of was 392 selected as follows; 113 Committee members, 11 County and National administrators, 185 youth, 7 reformed youth, 72 community members and 4 NGO representatives, who were all affiliated to the peacebuilding committees Data were collected through semi-structured questionnaires and key informant interview (KII) guides as well as observation checklists. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used for data analysis.

STUDY FINDINGS

Youths' involvement in peacebuilding is crucial for development. As such this study sought to establish youth agency in peacebuilding a critical component of youth policy in peace building. The findings of the study are presented in the ensuing paragraphs.

1. Youth engagement in maintaining peace in Mombasa County

The study sought to assess whether youth engagement was a strategy for the Mombasa County peacebuilding infrastructure and also determine the nature of this engagement. A summary of the data indicated that Sub-County Peacebuilding Committees engage youth in three main areas; combating radicalisation; creating economic opportunities and responsible citizenship through civic education. In the area of tackling radicalisation, 85% (N=97) of the respondents indicated that Sub-County Peacebuilding Committees engaged the youth. On economic opportunities, 82.3% (N=93) responded in the affirmative, while on responsible citizenship, 80.7% (N=92) replied that the Sub-County Peacebuilding Committees engaged with youth in the area of responsible citizenship. All these areas are important in increasing youth agency and ensuring that peacebuilding gets strong roots in the county.

Table 1.1 Youth engagement in maintaining peace in Mombasa County

	Tackling radicalisation		Creating economic opportunities		Responsible citizenship	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree	6	5.3	7	6.2	7	6.2
Disagree Agree	10	8.8	13	11.5	15	13.3
Strongly agree	81	71.7	85	75.2	81	71.7
Total	16	14.2	8	7.1	10	10
	113	100.0	113	100	113	100

Source: Field Data, 2021

2. Tackling Youth radicalisation as a Peacebuilding Strategy

A key activity in the Mombasa peacebuilding agenda is the engagement of youth through the tackling of radicalisation. The stated objective of the Government is to shrink the number of potential recruits into violent extremism. Holmer (2013) citing several researchers on radicalisation and violent extremism argues that radicalisation is highly contextual but certain socio-psychological traits can be universally understood, foremost is the feeling of needing to belong and the quest for validation.

Chitembwe *et al* (2021) argue that youth radicalisation can be viewed through the demonstration of unconventional beliefs/attitudes and engagement in violent action by young people. The Government of Kenya defines radicalisation as a

Measured and continuous process that exploits the psychological, politico-religious, and ideological conditioning of individuals to believe that they are part of a threatened or combative collective identity, to socialize them to violent extremism (National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism, 2016: 5).

There is ample evidence that youth are being radicalised in Mombasa (Hellsten, 2016; Mwangi, 2017; Githigaro, 2018; Githigaro and Kabia, 2022). Chitembwe *et al* (2021) note that radicalisation in Mombasa and Kwale counties has been going on for over twenty years. What is new is the violent extremism that has caused great socio-economic difficulties to the people. This research uncovered some information during the focus group discussions and KII sessions. Radicalisation takes place either when a youth is in the correctional system, as was revealed in a KII or the mosques as was revealed by youth in Kisauni who said that youth get radical ideas in mosques. On their part, the Sub-County Peacebuilding Committees have attempted to tackle this problem by engaging the youth directly. One of the DPC members who was a respondent summarised the

experience of the Sub-County Peacebuilding Committees as follows;

As one of the DPC, I can say we have talked to youth in juvenile gangs and helped them reform and helped them get alternative ways to leave. We also do public awareness on peace. We are currently talking to the youth and women about the importance of voting (civic education) (KII with DPC member, Kisauni, September 24, 2021)

In another focus group discussion, the work of the Sub-County Peacebuilding Committees were fully appreciated by village elders who have witnessed the destructive nature of radicalisation. A respondent had this to say

They (the DPC) brought together MRC¹ followers, talked to them, and guaranteed them safety. They poured out their issues, why they had joined that radical groups and why they want to involve themselves with other things. In the process, 80% withdrew from MRC membership. They have helped radicalized youths reform. Women in the DPC have played a great role in talking to their fellow women and telling them they should not always be dependent on their husbands and as a result, we have seen women engaging themselves with business (FGD with Village Elders, Changamwe, and September 29, 2021)

Mombasa Sub-County Peacebuilding Committees are supported by the recently published Kenya National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism (NAP), to fight violent extremism. Subsequently, Mombasa County unveiled its Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (MCAP-P/CVE) to guide the county's P/CVE efforts between 2017 and 2022. The MCAP-P/CVE outlines four strategic objectives: 1) to build community resilience toward violent extremism. 2) to promote human dignity, security, and access to justice for all. 3) to enhance county cohesion and integration, especially between people of different faiths. 4) to promote networking and cooperation between state (national and county) and non-state actors. Mombasa Sub-County Peacebuilding Committees were fully engaged in the process of developing this county strategy.

3. Youth economic empowerment as a peacebuilding strategy

Economic empowerment has for a long time been used as a peacebuilding strategy. The idea of economic empowerment emanated from the need to respond to marginalisation which can be described as both a process and a condition that prevents individuals or groups from full participation in social, economic and political life. According to a DFID report people can be marginalised due to multiple factors; sexual orientation, gender, geography, ethnicity, religion, displacement, conflict or disability. Schiffer and Schatz (2008) argue that marginalisation happens when one is distanced from power and resources and denied self-determination in economic, political, and social settings. However, definitions of what is regarded as marginalised are highly dependent on the historical and socio-economical context of a society, and sometimes it might be a personal feeling to decide whether one is marginalised or not. Economic empowerment has been used as one of the responses to marginalisation and a peacebuilding strategy.

Poverty is both a consequence and a cause of being marginalisation and is manifested by the unemployment rates of young people in any society. Radicalisation usually takes advantage of marginalised and unemployed youth. The Youth unemployment rate in Mombasa was determined at 44% (ILO, 2017), but the advent of Covid-19 introduced a steep slowdown in economic activity, in part because of stringent lockdown measures ordered by Government. This action pushed unemployment up and drove more youth into vulnerabilities. Youth in Mombasa now face an even greater challenge navigating a path to employment. The use of economic empowerment to counter extreme violence on the part of youth is not new. In Indonesia for example, where almost 60% of high school and university students admit to having a "radical" religious attitude, the Government has undertaken a wide range of programs through the central and local governments aimed at preventing youth violence and extremism (Asrori *et al*, 2018).

¹ Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) is a political organisation that was founded in 1999, to address political and economic discrimination against coastal peoples. The organisation was banned by the Kenya Government in 2008 on the suspicion of being affiliated to Al-Shabab, the terrorist organisation operation from Somalia.

Bangura (2016) in an article about youth involvement in peacebuilding cites an interview with a young man in Sierra Leone who is quoted to have said: “What is peace? It means nothing because we cannot eat it. If there is no education, no job, no food on the table, peace means nothing. It is not the favourite word in our dictionary” (Bangura, 2016:39). This quote brings home the point about the dilemma of peacebuilding in a situation where marginalisation has led to violent conflict. Sierra Leone suffered a long brutal and unnecessary civil war because of the problem of bad governance that created extreme poverty and which led to internal conflict. A vast number of youths joined the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and resorted to acts of extreme violence that remain some of the worst in recent history. It has been argued that the scale of the war and the ability to mobilise such a large number of youths could only have been possible in situations where people are disaffected by their government as was the case of Sierra Leone. The RUF quickly became an army not of rebels a group spreading terror among innocent villagers. In situations where few opportunities are availed to young people, they will claim space by engaging in many anti-social acts and Sierra Leone serves as a good case in point.

The study sought to find out if Mombasa Sub-County Peacebuilding Committees engaged in youth economic empowerment as part of their peacebuilding strategy. According to the respondents, 82.3% (N=93) answered in the affirmative. In Mombasa County, several youth empowerment projects led by the county and national governments and NGOs are focusing on youth for economic empowerment and countering radicalisation and extremism. The Kenya Youth Empowerment and Opportunities Project (KYEOP) funded projects are supporting youth-led enterprises from waste management to ICT and lifting many youths out of poverty, vulnerability and potential extremism. The Ministry of ICT, Innovation and Youth Affairs has launched the Kenya Shillings120 million *Future Bora* (Bright Future) under which innovative programs in environmental management will be funded. Another example is the Youth empowerment program initiative (YEPI) which works with youth aged 16-35 who are most at risk for unemployment, poverty and violent extremism in Mombasa.

Kisunza and Theuri (2014) in a study on the *Determinants of effective utilization of youth enterprise development fund: A case of Kisauni Constituency, Mombasa County in Kenya*. Argue that while such funds are available for youth, most youths do not have information on how to access the funds. Secondly, arduous application processes and lack of proper entrepreneurial skills reduces the potential for the funds to change the life of the youths. This approach has the potential of further marginalising the youth and pushing them towards radicalisation and violent extremism.

Working across partnerships, the Sub-County Peacebuilding Committees collaborate with youth-serving organisations on economic empowerment as part of their peacebuilding strategy. Youth economic empowerment in Mombasa County has taken on a deeper meaning because of the experience that the county has had with youth idleness. One youth empowerment organisation observed for example, that the high unemployment rates among youth not only deny the county the benefit of the youth dividend but also places many youths at the disposal of extremist philosophy which is the precursor of violent extremism. What is more, the low educational achievement of youth in the county calls for a different approach to youth empowerment (African Youth Trust, 2021).

Several programs are ongoing to support youth empowerment. For example, under the Mombasa County Government Social Protection Strategy (2018-2022), the County is managing the Consolidated Revolving Fund, to create employment opportunities for young people and women through entrepreneurship training and the provision of affordable financial and business development support services. Similarly, the Government of Kenya's Youth Empowerment and Opportunities Project (KYEOP-), the Youth Empowerment Program Initiative (YEPI), the African Youth Trust- a partnership of several international NGOs (AYT), and the Kenya Youth Business Trust Pwani are all working on one aspect of youth empowerment or the other. According to Mombasa County Social Protection Strategy, the areas that have the potential for youth employment include agriculture and agri-processing, construction, tourism, micro trade and retail, fisheries, export processing zones and waste management and recycling.

One co-opted member of the Sub-County Peacebuilding Committees had this to say when asked how the DPC works in order to empower youth:

I am from the youth office and in the youth office, we normally have several programs and functions that involve the youths. In our youth office, we have programs that will help them to build their economic muscles or financial muscles. We deal with youths, women and people living with disabilities. From the office, we mostly encourage them to be in registered groups because we offer business grants and loans from the National government. In business loans, we have *Uwezo* funds and Youth funds. When we bring them together, we train them on entrepreneurship financial management and in the process of teaching them because they are in groups we sensitize them on why it is important to be peaceful. (KII with a coopted member of DPC, Changamwe, September 24, 2021)

While economic empowerment as a peacebuilding strategy is a viable strategy, it has major implementation challenges, especially when radicalised youth are the beneficiaries. This is particularly so when youth who have been with Al-Shabaab are supposed to be reintegrated into society. The reintegration of Al-Shabaab returnees is an emotive issue which has been worsened by the lack of structures to ensure the proper involvement of host communities in the reintegration process of these returnees. Juma and Githigaro (2021) argue that Kenya is not unique in grappling with the reintegration of former combatants, however, Al-Shabaab returnees face unique socio-economic and psychological challenges, because of lack of opportunities and stigmatisation, on the one hand, and the fear of Al-Shabaab retaliation on the other.

Juma (2020) in a study of exiting terrorism and rehabilitation of former Al-Shabaab members found that the threat of the organisation still loomed big for former members even after leaving the organisation. In this study, Juma argues that the returnees faced an imminent threat from the terrorist group having been labelled traitors while at the community level, they are treated with both suspicions by the security agencies and with envy by others who see them receiving economic support to start over as productive and responsible citizens. All this is happening amidst poor socio-psychological support for these young people.

A 2016 rehabilitation program for returnees in Kwale run by the IOM underlined some of the challenges. While almost 50 people completed the program, the program created dangerous rivalries between returnees who were selected to take part and those who were not. Those left out felt further marginalised as those selected are at times provided with motorbikes to become *boda-boda* (public transport operators using motorbikes) while the others look on under the same conditions that might have driven them to Al-Shabaab in the first place. There have been incidences of attacks on these rehabilitated youth by their colleagues with whom they had spent time in the terrorist camps. It would appear that the issue of Al-Shabaab is far from over, for Kenya. In March 2022, a single Al-Shabaab returnee was handed over to the Anti-Terrorism Police Unit (ATPU) by a Mandera court, to be transferred to Nairobi for de-radicalisation and reintegration at the National Counter-Terrorism Centre (NCTC) into society. Despite a general amnesty declared in 2014, this was the first recorded voluntary surrender in Mandera (*Daily Nation*, March 2022)

4. Engaging Youth in Peacebuilding Through Civic Education

Civic education has been used as a peacebuilding strategy to inculcate good citizenship mannerisms on the part of the recipient. The rationale behind civic education, as Levin and Bishai (2010) argue, is that it provides a positive framework for collective civic identity, and therefore it can be a stabilizing factor in societies suffering from violent conflict or its aftermath. Crittenden (2017) defines civic education as a process of influencing peoples beliefs action as responsible members of a society. The authors argue further that civic education, which is lifelong, is not always deliberate but can be transmitted by institutions in society. It is not limited to the educational system of a country and is provided by families, governments, religious institutions, and mass media. Given the wide range of civic education sources, the right education must be provided in case it is being used as a strategy for peacebuilding. Citing Sherrod *et al*, Crittenden and Levine (2018) argue that civic habits and values are relatively easy to influence and change while people are still young, hence the importance of well-designed civic education programs for peacebuilding.

Examples of civic education provided by or with the collaboration of Mombasa DPC are many. At the policy level, the Mombasa County Public Participation Policy (2020) has elaborated a civic education strategy which is aimed at making the public more aware of the devolution of Government and promoting the rights and responsibilities of individuals in their governance. It ensures that a critical mass of citizens is endowed with

knowledge and skills to understand their role in their involvement in the governance processes of their government. By law, County Governments must undertake civic education in line with the principles of the devolved government in the Constitution of Kenya, 2010 (County Governments Act, 2012, Part X). In addition, Section 100 (4) requires that county civic education programs involve the participation of registered non-state actors.

The study sought to find out if Mombasa Sub-County Peacebuilding Committees engage youth in civic education as part of the peacebuilding strategy. 72.7% (N=92) answered in the affirmative. Some examples of civic education programs running in Mombasa county in the collaboration with Sub-County Peacebuilding Committees are; *Uongozi Bora* Community Initiative Project implemented by Kwacha Afrika; the African Youth Trust, AYT which conducts civic education and awareness targeting the youth around pertinent issues of governance and civic importance, and is supported by USAID through ACT Kenya, URAIA, *Amkeni Wakenya* (Wake Up Kenyans) the former Ministry of Justice, National Cohesion and Constitutional Affairs in Kenya and Commission for the Implementation of the Constitution.

In a focus group discussion, the issue of civic education was addressed and it seemed to have the support of the village representatives as well.

Community members need to be educated because if people are not educated on the dangers of conflicts and the benefits of peace it is hard to get sustainable peace. We need to get to the grassroots and involve religious leaders, educate them, and use them to pass the information to their followers. *Boda* (public motorcycle riders) riders should be educated on how to avoid words that might cause conflicts. (FGD with villagers, Jomvu, September 21, 2021)

Even though the study was interested in civic education within the context of peacebuilding, it became clear that civic education is seen as a political exercise mostly provided around the time of elections. However, the final outcome is usually peace at the community level and therefore it can be argued the civic education supports peacebuilding. A good example of the same was provided by the peacebuilding partners of the Sub-County Peacebuilding Committees such as, the Likoni-based *Manyatta* Youth and Entertainment Society and JUHUDI organisations who even though they are primarily civic education organisations, have also greatly contributed to peacebuilding in their daily programs.

CONCLUSION

Youth were found to be an important factor in the County peacebuilding agenda, however, there was no policy or programmatic strategy for their involvement. The study established that sustainable peacebuilding opportunities exist through the peacebuilding partners already working in the County, and through the Terms of Reference of the Sub-County Peacebuilding Committees issued by the Government of Kenya, through the National Steering Committee on Peacebuilding and Conflict Management (NSC). The study concludes that Sub-County Peacebuilding Committees experience weakened agency because of the National Government's policy of not resourcing them.

RECOMMENDATION

Regarding youth, the study recommends that that the responsibilities and composition of the Sub-County Peacebuilding Committees should be reviewed to reflect Youth Agency in both activities and membership. A major issue that came out of the study was the unpreparedness of the Sub-County Peacebuilding Committees to undertake peacebuilding activities. The study recommends that Government should consider a basic pre-service program at the level of "Certificate in Peacebuilding" which should be a requirement for all Sub-County Peacebuilding Committees. This could be done in collaboration with a leading academic institution in peacebuilding.

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