

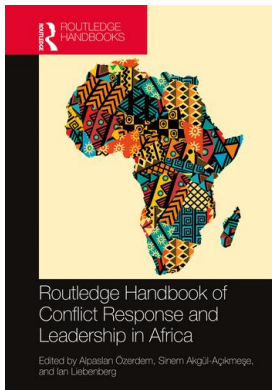
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LOCAL COMMUNITIES, ICTS, AND CONFLICT PREVENTION IN AFRICA

A critical inquiry

Chas Morrison

Introduction

This chapter explores the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in enabling effective communication at intra-group and inter-group levels to diffuse and reduce outbreaks of civil violence in Africa. Recent advances in technology have opened up opportunities for social activists to better influence conflict and to prevent or reduce violence levels. This has significant implications for the leadership of conflict and peace dynamics, as responsibility for triggering or reducing violence moves away from armed actors and security forces to encompass civil society, religious groups, and non-aligned digital actors. ICTs have profound implications for altering leadership structures, particularly at local levels, through a general transfer of influence and outreach to younger people, individuals rather than groups, and non-traditional and potentially disruptive actors. While most definitions of leadership emphasize influence as an integral aspect (Winston and Patterson 2006), this chapter's presentation of leadership includes leaders who may not be part of any formal organization. ICT provides avenues for leadership and influence independent of one's social position and which may be only loosely connected to one's ethical foundation. Such changes in communications can be simultaneously disruptive, innovative, and challenging to the status quo of socio-political power, and, furthermore, these emerging 'leaders' may not consider themselves leaders at all.

The rate of Internet-enabled devices and users has grown dramatically in recent years. By mid-2018, the world had 4.1 billion active Internet users and 3.3 billion social media users (Statista 2018). Efforts to create systems and peace infrastructures capable of monitoring and interpreting conflict-related data trends that use technology have become commonplace (Mugah and Diniz 2013). Although Africa's overall Internet use still lags behind other regions of the world, as does smartphone ownership (Pew Research Centre 2018), it is now the region with the highest percentage growth of Internet users: 10.2% per annum growth (Internet World Stats 2018). Africa's growing population and youthful demographics will be important aspects of the increasing use of technologies, as the Internet is significantly more widespread among young people and educated people (Pew Research Centre 2018).

This research employed multi-stakeholder workshops, discussion sessions, questionnaires, and interviews to elicit opinions and feedback from citizen and civil society activists on ICT's contributions to conflict reduction. Our findings suggest that early warning rarely translates into appropriate early response if it is externally driven, adding to the body of knowledge indicating that the greater inclusion of local communities has massive potential to improve conflict management outcomes. Findings from other case studies conclude that conflict prevention interventions designed in a top-down manner are likely to fail (Mancini and Reilly 2013).

Our research suggests that dialogue and trust are more salient in preventing violence than technological tools or other innovations, particularly if external actors promote these. Established communication channels between stakeholders that are already characterized by trust and open information sharing are more likely to be made more effective and durable through ICT than channels that are initiated through ICT alone. Therefore, ICT can be useful support but is less likely to be the main instigator of peaceful social change itself. Much depends still on local leadership, trust, and non-ICT communications.

Overview of the context and existing challenges

In many societies at risk of violent conflict, grassroots civil society organizations which are close to local events and people are aware of escalating tensions and tipping points and are well positioned to monitor conflict activity. Such organizations can build relationships and enable communications between conflicting parties and authorities. While local communities and civil society groups have a grounded understanding of conflict dynamics and triggers, they often suffer exclusion or insufficient capacity to respond effectively, as the state security leadership structures do not listen to voices from below. Civil society actors are frequently hindered by weak access to political decision makers and security forces and inadequate knowledge of formal conflict prevention architecture. The authorities and armed forces often only respond *after* violence has surpassed critical levels or attracted international attention. While security forces may be necessary to contain violence and reduce destruction, they are frequently implicated in the conflict and in raising tensions.

A number of triggers, proximate causes of conflict, and underlying structural causes can escalate tensions. Political elections are often associated with outbreaks of violence, particularly if linked to fraud, vote manipulation, or hate speech. Gossip and rumours are frequent conflict triggers, especially regarding certain socio-ethnic groups. Recent years have witnessed widespread use of social media to heighten conflict tensions and galvanize groups of people into taking action, often violently (Warren 2015).

Peacebuilding actors use different terminologies, software, and reference points. There is a lack of standardization, compounding the weak channels of communication between stakeholders. This silo mentality limits information sharing between different organizations and sectors, with the result that lessons learnt are not sufficiently communicated across agencies or groups or even within them. Civilians may be reluctant to provide information to authorities or security forces due to mistrust, lack of channels to report suspicions, or a conviction that the intelligence will not be listened to, believed, or acted on. There is a danger of non-anonymity for informants, as providing politically sensitive information may be punished by security forces or other groups. If individuals can provide information about potential conflict triggers, reporting channels are needed that are anonymous and secret. Here ICT has a key role: the use of SMS (short message service), for example, using encrypted networks that do not record the source. However, such early warning software is unlikely to be provided by the authorities, even if they control ICT infrastructure. Given the low levels of trust that normally exists between citizens

and government, especially in Africa (Bratton and Gyimah-Boadi 2016), people may be suspicious of *any* method for reporting information to the state and its security forces. Other analyses of so-called liberation technology, such as ICT for increased accountability and transparency, conclude that “the track record of many of these initiatives has been spotty” (Kalathil 2015: 4). There is considerable evidence that outbreaks of collective violence correlate with the spread of ICT use (Warren 2015) and particularly the penetration of mobile phone coverage (Pierskalla and Hollenbach 2013). Despite these caveats, there is significant potential for ICT to play a greater role in fostering peaceful communities (Mancini and Reilly 2013), especially if this emerges through greater multi-stakeholder collaboration between technology innovators and peace researchers and practitioners (Miklian and Hoelscher 2018).

Effective early warning reduces the destructive effects of violence. It increases opportunities for conflicting parties to engage constructively, but a coherent multi-stakeholder response is required in order for these responses to have an impact. Local authorities with the capacity to respond effectively seldom benefit from locally sourced early warning intelligence, for example, when provided by civil society groups. Conversely, much support for ICT innovations and their potential comes from WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic) perspectives that may lack insights into people’s daily realities in societies at risk of violent conflict. Similarly, labels and frameworks used by ICT specialists may not capture the lived experiences of conflict-affected people. Where peaceful outcomes have emerged, it is difficult to trace exactly how ICT has contributed (Dafoe and Lyall 2015). The assumed connections between the desired impact, processes, and inputs are vague and unsubstantiated. Many assumptions about potential users’ access, capacity, and motivation to use ICT for preventing civil violence have turned out to be overly optimistic. As Pierskalla and Hollenbach (2013) identified, ICT growth in Africa can lead to both short-term “shocks” that contribute to civil violence while simultaneously contributing to economic and political development associated with reduced conflict incidence.

The ‘warning–response’ gap

Technology innovations have been used to create conflict prevention architecture of different types. For example, early warning and early response systems using crowdsourcing on mobile phones have been enabled by technological advances and increasing handset affordability. Yet a persistent **gap** between warning and response remains in terms of concrete **action**. This indicates how the political and procedural apparatus is not sufficiently developed for decision-making processes to be influenced by existing conflict prevention and early warning systems. Furthermore, technological innovators are often regarded as focusing on easily solvable problems rather than on the most important social issues (Fagerberg, Martin and Andersen 2013).

The key challenge here is how this gap in conflict prevention can be reduced and how conflict prevention platforms can build cooperative relationships with political decision makers based on trust and accountability. Our collaborative research project explored practical methods for early warning and early response initiatives that connect ‘warners’, such as local organized community activists, with ‘responders’, those stakeholders in leadership positions, able to mobilize resources and initiate wider dialogue and violence prevention processes. Our research partners indicated that ICT tools, in general, are insufficient for reducing conflict and need to be contextualized and augmented with other non-technological initiatives to be impactful. Many international programmes overlook existing systems and skills that already exist in every society (Anderson and Wallace 2013). Thus conflict prevention architecture cannot be examined in isolation from other development initiatives.

Whatever the quality of early warning data, it only becomes significant when preventative or responsive action is taken as a result. The implications of failing to capture and analyse data are quite different from the implications of failing to act effectively on receiving this data, which is a result of inadequate leadership rather than a shortcoming in data management. Multiple factors hinder efforts to prevent civil violence, of which the decision-making apparatus within government is only one weakness. A ‘culture of prevention’ has been widely mainstreamed by policymakers and practitioners, and we now have the technological means to collect and analyse enormous amounts of data. Yet as the field of conflict prevention has grown over time, so too have concerns over its effectiveness. Studies such as Matveeva (2006), Mehler (2005), and Wulf and Debiel (2009) indicated that the practice of conflict prevention has been weak, compared to its promise, and it is unable to demonstrate convincing results from prevention efforts. Technology is not the main driver of social progress; Toyama (2015) cautions against the idea that major social problems can be resolved just by applying the correct technologies. The locus of attention needs to be put back onto affected people and their complex interactions with one another, with the authorities, and with the security forces.

Like any tool or innovation, ICT can magnify entrenched inequalities as well as lead to solutions (Toyama 2015), depending on how it is employed and who has control over it. Even in a world steeped in technology, the overall consensus is that social challenges are best met with social solutions (Toyama 2015). Anderson and Wallace (2013) highlighted the importance of community leaders who can articulate non-violent ideals and promote a non-conflictual position, embedded within traditional values, to facilitate dialogue with local armed groups.

The potential for early warning infrastructures to deliver on preventing violent conflict is hampered by several factors. Communication channels between communities and authorities are normally weak or mistrustful. Political elites are unlikely to act on information from citizens and may have a vested interest in allowing or even promoting violence. State authorities may not agree on how to prevent conflict, and poorly designed conflict prevention mechanisms can aggravate local tensions. Even where there is willingness, responding to conflict takes time due to politics, lack of common values, lack of capacity, inter-agency competition, etc. A lack of information is rarely the main problem (Wulf and Debiel 2009). A narrow focus on conflict prevention indicators allows communities’ risks and exposure to violence to be measured, but not their resilience or capacity to build and maintain peace. Many of these critical factors are intuitive rather than data based, depend on ‘messy’ and repeated social interactions, and operate over long time frames. Such factors do not easily translate into narrow process-based and linear ICT operability.

Challenges and opportunities for ICT in conflicted environments

In recent years, various tools have been developed to address the gap between conflict warning and response, notably a range of crowdsourcing technologies. These have been employed in a range of social and political environments, inter alia, monitoring electoral violence, responding to disasters, supporting public health initiatives, or reporting incidents of corruption. Such innovations in ICT to bridge the gap between communities and authorities have increasingly been used across many parts of the globe. The World Bank (2016) referred to this as the digital revolution but highlighted the need to consider the “analogue complements” to maximize the impacts from ICT use. However, ICT-driven tools remain a favourite with donors and the international community. There are serious concerns that such tools are often imposed externally and do not reflect local needs and priorities and are not sufficiently sensitive to local specificities

or operating environments (Morrison 2016). ICT hardware tends to be expensive, difficult to maintain and repair, and easily stolen.

Mobile phone innovations, across Africa particularly, differ in several key aspects to patterns found in the WEIRD world, beyond the general lower penetration of ICT and disposable income. People use mobile phones much more for money transfers, e-commerce payments, and more advanced financial activities such as credit, savings, and insurance. ICT usage has leapfrogged other technologies (Adeleye and Eboagu 2019), particularly the use of landline phones and banking practices. Citizens in Africa are at the forefront of personal ICT device usage and socio-political change. The question here is to what extent this distinction translates into actionable pro-peace initiatives. In particular, Kenya and Nigeria have developed and employed a variety of crowdsourcing ICT tools used for conflict prevention and response. Some of the more famous include the following:

- *Ushahidi*: Used for election monitoring and mapping outbreaks of civil violence in Kenya
- *Uwiano Platform*: Kenyan SMS-based system to monitor violent hotspots and establish peace committees
- *Artificial intelligence for monitoring elections*: Monitors tweets to identify election violence and vote rigging in Nigeria
- *Uchaguzi*: Allowed citizens to report violence or suspicious activities leading up to the 2013 General Election in Kenya
- *Sisi Ni Amani Kenya*: SMS-based system to promote civic engagement and reduce community violence, especially land conflicts
- *Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN)*: Across East Africa, focusing on pastoralist communities; data collection, analysis, response option formulation, and cross-agency coordination
- *ECOWAS Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN)*: Incorporates GIS tools, field monitoring, and human rights indicators for trend analysis of violence and early warning conflict mitigation)
- *PeaceTXT*: Emerged from Sisi Ni Amani, an SMS-based system to promote non-violence and mobilise peaceful collective responses to voting tensions

The most striking aspect of these technological innovations is how rapidly they become unsustainable and defunct. The Forum on Early Warning and Early Response (FEWER) no longer operates despite its original popularity, and there are other such examples. These tools tended to operate on a large scale and relied on inputs of crowdsourced quantitative data. This is part of a wider agenda towards localization within the humanitarian and aid industries (Wall and Hedlund 2016), due to a realization that international responses are often inconsistent, expect rapid results in short time frames, are insufficiently coordinated, overlook local peacebuilding capacities, and rely excessively on influential power holders.

Incorporating ICT into conflict transformation programmes

Specialists in ICT for conflict prevention acknowledge that new technologies are not a panacea for preventing conflict. While social media was lauded for facilitating the Arab Spring protests, several governments have employed the same tools and apps to identify and punish protesters and activists (Comminos 2013). Following the horrendous bombings in Sri Lanka in April 2019, the government decided to temporarily close down social media, including WhatsApp and

Facebook, as they were heavily implicated in spreading rumours and false information (Ellis-Petersen 2019). The governments of India and Pakistan have similarly identified social media as contributing to ethno-religious tensions (Reuters 2019) and have accused it of triggering group violence, revenge attacks, and fake news.

In Sri Lanka, during the final years of civil war, the author was in contact with a local training centre funded by an international NGO, which bought computers and printers and started ICT courses for displaced Tamil civilians. Local Sinhalese people, who had also suffered in the war, understandably became resentful at this ethnic favouritism. Groups of people demanded access to the training courses and threatened to disrupt the centre's activities. Following a consultation process, balance was restored by providing ICT training for anyone who wished to enrol, and the ensuing ethnically mixed classes used English, a neutral language in this case. This successfully brought different groups of people together and defused conflict tensions.

Introducing ICT innovations into conflict transformation should not be viewed as a quick fix to solve deep-rooted problems surrounding violence. Respondents in our research across three countries consistently recommended relying on ICT that is already in use, rather than introducing new tools. For example, SMS-enabled phones are more common than smartphones, and downloading apps depend on reliable and affordable Internet connection.

Community dialogues are a popular means of disseminating information, normally used to target an audience with specific information. This low-tech tradition is often eroded during the prolonged civil conflict and may not be adequately appreciated by external actors. Another influential communications tool is a public board on which messages are written, read by commuters walking to and from work every day. These low-tech forms of communication are a critical consideration in understanding escalating tensions and appropriate responses to preventing violence. However, ICT should not limit peacebuilders, if it complements other tools and practices. Low-tech communications like flyers, radio programmes, pamphlets, and even signboards may resonate more with communities lacking good Internet access or ICT hardware. An example from our Tanzanian partner shows how an international NGO wanted to undertake a survey relating to extremist views held by Zanzibari youth. Understandably, enthusiasm for such a sensitive project was initially very low. Many respondents stated that they would not be willing to share such information with someone they had never met. After a series of village level meetings organized through a local association and repeated face-to-face engagements, confidence and trust were established to the point that full participation in a mobile survey could take place, even for highly divisive and potentially risky data collection.

Case study: using ICT in Zanzibar

We conducted an anonymous multiple-choice survey during a workshop to investigate existing communications infrastructure and preferences. Thirty-two participants were asked how often they use various communication tools, their age, and their sex. The average age of respondents was late twenties and early thirties, and three-quarters were men. Table 22.1 shows the preferences of respondents' use of communications tools.

It is evident that the top four most commonly used communication tools for the workshop participants are mobile phone, television, SMS, and radio, which most respondents used several times a day. Personal computers were also surprisingly high in the ranking, perhaps indicating that our respondents are not reflective of Zanzibari demographics as a whole. However, Internet cafes and landlines are rapidly falling out of use due to the rise of cheap mobile phones. The low ranking for flyers likely indicates that our respondents do not use them much, but they at least see them regularly; this was verified during previous meetings. Many people said that being

Table 22.1 Preferences of respondents' use of communication tools in Zanzibar

<i>Ranking</i>	<i>Communication tool</i>
1	Mobile phone
2	TV
3	SMS
4	Radio
5	Personal computer
6	WhatsApp
7	Facebook
8	Email
9	Newspaper
10	Other [various responses provided]
11	Internet café
12	Flyer
13	Landline

given a leaflet in a public place was rarely a positive sign and often indicated a political campaign or mobilization for a street demonstration.

During Ramadan, in response to a Christian group in Zanzibar choosing that sensitive time to evangelize others, peace activists used communication technologies such as SMS to mobilize and present a united front against groups advocating violence and encouraging non-violent means of protest. Radio programmes are excellent due to the prevalence of local stations and huge listenership, allowing important information to be passed to the general population. Traditional media, such as radio and television, greatly impact more traditional societies and are very relevant for peace if used effectively.

East African researchers in the project highlighted the importance of non-violent street protests, posters, petitions, multi-stakeholder workshops, and linking pro-peace movements with religious associations, although it is acknowledged that this can have adverse impacts. Working with multiple stakeholders and responding to conflict depends on strengthened networks, trust, and avoiding the us/them mentality. In many communities, respected individuals such as faith or tribal leaders can have a significant influence for mobilizing people to work for peace or for conflict, and groups of young men appear particularly susceptible to such messages.

Engaging the major stakeholders in promoting peace

Supporting local community-based organizations and local capacities for peace requires a highly sensitive approach, and respect and genuine recognition of local leadership should inform programmes from the beginning. Strengthening multi-stakeholder cooperation and integrating ICT should be part of wider initiatives to improve government accountability to citizens and governance mechanisms in general (Miklian and Hoelscher 2018), rather than focusing narrowly only on preventing violence. Actively building trust and operational consistency are key elements. Our project partners recommend improving working relations between conflict stakeholders before introducing any ICT innovations, particularly for external actors such as peacebuilding agencies. It is important to facilitate meetings between actors who normally have no contact and create spaces for individuals and hard-to-reach or marginalized groups to express their opinions without being dominated by the more powerful. Key connections within each context serve

to build bridges, allowing established levels of trust to radiate to a wider network of stakeholders. Introducing ICT into a community by working with local partners needs to avoid making assumptions about the communities' interests and intentions.

Police

The police are perhaps the most important stakeholder in local conflict transformation after the communities themselves. Our research found that efforts by the police to work with citizens rather than against them are very warmly received. For example, at one multi-stakeholder workshop, the presence of the police was welcomed by participants, even though a lack of trust between communities and police was one of the main challenges raised during the day. The changing attitudes towards the police can be attributed to a number of factors. Building more constructive interactions between citizens and police is an effective response to conflicted societies. Participants who had attended more than one workshop had more positive attitudes towards the police than those who were participating for the first time. Attendees who came for multiple events could meet police officers in a comfortable environment, exposing them to the human side of the police force. It was evident that very few participants had much direct knowledge of the police.

Police forces often lament the lack of community cooperation to combat violence and bring perpetrators to justice, partly due to the weak trust between police and citizens but also a genuine fear of reprisals. Another behaviour that our respondents reported is the excessive use of force by police to restore order or enforce commands. The improving attitudes towards police in many countries could stem from efforts by the police themselves to improve their relations with the public and widen channels of communication. For example, the Zanzibar police have established a public relations office, and the ICT office of the police runs a Facebook page. The police have also established a community policing department and have started providing school education on the work of the police.

Conversely, in South Africa, the police are often viewed as part of the problem rather than the solution. The Gauteng Local Peace Committees took deliberate action to build bridges with the local Community Policing Forums. In Alexandra, for example, this required meeting senior officers who could then assist in making the necessary community-level connections. In the city of Diepkloof, it was decided to include the police directly in the peace committee structure. These examples highlight the need for context-specific approaches. Where strong relationships between the police and local structures have been established, they appear to be valued by all sides. In Gauteng where the local peace committees have been active, the police have taken on board the need for improved approaches from their own side. In the police stations, posters and banners are placed to remind officers to create positive changes in how they work and relate to the general public. Local peacebuilders in South Africa suggest that relations between police and citizens would be enhanced if they had access to ICT tools to improve communications.

Youth

Young people are often the main users of ICT and have great potential to be agents of social change, but their contributions to peace are often overlooked. They are often the least likely group to attend formal meetings, but they are the most likely to commit violence and are frequently victims of violence. In hierarchical and traditional societies, the youth may feel excluded and ignored, so engaging with them as valued equals assists in mobilizing them away from violence and a confrontational mindset. Young people may not commit to a series of workshops, so

it is necessary to identify avenues that will engage them: film-making, sports events, competitions, skills development, and so on.

As an example, the Zanzibari group, YIFOZA, created a short video to sensitize others to issues relating to transforming conflict. This video has since been adopted by the Zanzibar Electoral Commission as a sensitization tool during elections. The Committee of Religious Leaders has also taken it up to screen during election campaigns to promote peaceful activities. A subsequent video drew on learning experiences from the first video, with a more overtly gendered outlook (*Mwanamke Jasiri*, 'Brave Woman'). This highlighted the need for youth to engage constructively with elections and the importance of communicating that agenda to politicians. It also shows how perceiving 'youth' as a homogeneous group overlooks the need to engage in distinct ways with men and women, particularly in highly gendered societies.

The power of this youth identity is also apparent in the work in Gauteng. Youth are seen as the drivers of change and are often at the forefront of efforts to protect migrants from other regions of Africa when conflict has escalated, and violent threats are issued against foreigners and outsiders. But efforts have always been made to ensure a mix of participants: youth, women, elders, locals, migrants, activists, and local authority representatives, as well as the police in some instances. This diversity strengthens the sense of organization and helps develop strategies that reach a wider constituency and work more effectively to coordinate responses.

The division between youth and elders was also evident in the rural parts of Gulu, Uganda. The local group, People's Voice for Peace, actively engages with these tensions to build strong relationships. To help lay a stronger relational foundation, they involve political representatives, who are often much older, in reporting sessions and ensuring that they have a strong voice within these meetings.

Women

Women can have influence and power that subverts or bypasses mainstream power and structures in society, which men often downplay or ignore. While often not the main protagonists in carrying out violence, they are often perceived as soft targets, which overlooks the mobilizing and antagonistic activities they may undertake. Our research project did not uncover significant differences in the way men and women use ICT. A gendered approach to reducing violence often involves sensitizing men and encouraging discussion of their understanding of women's rights and needs, not only in armed conflict. Depending on the culture, it may be preferable to have separate discussions and meetings at which only females are present and in mixed groups; it may be necessary to allow women time and space to speak and prevent men from interrupting them or speaking over them. Societies where women have relatively high social status show greater potential for successful peacebuilding activities (Gizelis 2011).

Women are likely to have a broader interpretation than men of what constitutes violence. Prevention measures like an early warning and pre-emptive dialogue to reduce the likelihood of violence need to be engaged, along with the structural and root causes of conflict (UN Women 2015). In particular, Liberia has a strong history of successful women-led initiatives to prevent conflict and to transform conflicted societies, such as the Women in Peacebuilding Network and the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace.

Religious leaders

Faith leaders often hold an influential role in society and frequently position themselves with regard to both the authorities and civil society groups. In many societies, they occupy positions

of legitimacy and power and enjoy popular support as figureheads. For example, they are often respected more than government authorities or even other types of traditional leaders (Bratton and Gyimah-Boadi 2016). They can influence others for both peaceful and violent ends. Engagement with faith leaders contributes to promoting conflict transformation and reducing tensions, even for secular organizations, and in terms of their local level influence, they are unparalleled. Faith leaders are likely to be traditional and more hesitant about ICT or any innovations, so a longer lead-in time is required for them to embrace changes and new methods. It is strongly advised to engage faith leaders in peacebuilding processes, especially if religious divisions are a major factor in civil violence. Still, international agencies have historically overlooked faith leaders as key agents for positive social change (Clarke 2007).

Conclusion

Effective conflict prevention and early warning approaches depend on building and strengthening relationships based on trust, dialogue, and shared goals. Technological innovations can support this but are not a substitute for it. The best ICT for peacebuilding or any social development will *amplify* existing human interactions rather than replace them or emphasize social divisions. The role here of effective leadership is to facilitate those human interactions and capitalize on them to work against the culture of violence. Systems and skills for violence reduction already exist within communities but are often overlooked or misinterpreted. We should not assume that new and special structures, attitudes, and approaches need to be developed. Instead, it is essential to recognize and build on local capacities for peace. Armed violence is not a problem that is solved by finding the correct solution; it is a complex and messy social phenomenon embedded within wider systems of inequality, grievance, and power dynamics. Conflict is inevitable in human societies and even desirable under certain circumstances, but violent conflict can be mitigated and reduced. Conflict and violence are distinct, and this division is the starting point for a conflict-sensitive approach to ICT usage.

Mobile phones, social media, or blogs are tools, not approaches. Their potential to influence conflict and prevent violence may be amplified under certain favourable conditions, such as existing channels of communication with good inter-organizational trust. If ICTs are imposed externally in an effort to find a 'solution' to conflict, they are likely to be ineffective and unsustainable and can deepen social divisions. Where ICTs are used to develop communication channels, they should build on local people's existing engagement with technology. Introducing equipment, software, or practices outside of people's comfort zone will require significant groundwork and adds risk to the sustainability and viability of projects.

Effective local-level conflict transformation is highly contextual and must be community led, whether or not there is external support. Ideally, community security is a shared responsibility for citizens, security forces, and authorities. Responsive conflict prevention and early warning are more likely to succeed based on working relationships and clear communication between these stakeholders. Within this approach, ICT can be beneficial in reducing conflict tensions and mitigating triggers that cause conflict to become violent. Where ICT is effectively employed, the results are not necessarily replicable because the variables which have enabled success may differ elsewhere. Context-specific approaches are required. Local organizations with competent leaders are essential to building significant relationships among other civil society organizations, as are the government and police in having positive effect. External agencies can augment the importance of local leaders but cannot replace them.

The peacebuilding field is full of examples of inappropriate technologies that have failed to live up to expectations. Instead, low-cost and simple communications tools can have

significant impacts. We suggest a long-term peacebuilding approach that emphasizes processes, leadership, and relationships rather than the classic conflict resolution model that focuses on outcomes and impacts. The aim is to reform the patterns of interaction between parties rather than expecting them to strive towards a particular outcome. In its widest sense, conflict transformation should comprise longer-term activities that strengthen structural stability (Vanheusden 2011).

ICTs are disruptive in that they challenge existing power hierarchies and ways of operating. This is true for local dynamics and relations between communities and external agencies such as humanitarian actors. ICTs diffuse the locus of power and contribute to more horizontal channels of influence. Conflict-affected people are agents of change, not victims or beneficiaries. Innovations and tools that they do not feel they own or have a vested interest in are unlikely to be continued after external support has stopped. The key point for peacebuilders is to amplify and link, rather than set up new systems. Strengthening avenues for trust, dialogue, and communication is more salient and durable than ICT innovations but is also a longer-term and complex endeavour. Completing the transition from macro-level political early warning to citizen-based forms of conflict response remains difficult, but ICT has a role in expediting this process. The major challenge now is how to engage a wider range of community leaders and recognize their knowledge, capabilities, and efforts.

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