

## **Title**

*Towards a better conflict management framework: the role of national, regional and continental organisations*

## **About this paper**

This paper examines the root causes of conflict and violent conflicts in Africa, the main achievement and gaps/weaknesses that compound the conflict managements in place. On the other hand seeks to establish a comprehensive conflict management framework at national, regional and continental levels. It argues that there is a need of an improved capacity for management of conflicts through the strengthening of various actors (national, regional, and continental organisations and political will) which is critical in order to ensure the continued consolidation of democracy and to maintain peace and political, social and economic stability on which future prosperity depends upon.

## **Author:**

Adérito Machava, MA. Assistant lecturer and researcher, Department of History - Eduardo Mondlane University, Maputo- Mozambique  
Email: [aderito.machava@uem.mz](mailto:aderito.machava@uem.mz), [admachava@yahoo.com](mailto:admachava@yahoo.com)  
Tel: +258 842650280

## **1. Introduction**

African countries' democratisation processes, which are accompanied by an accelerated globalisation, economic, social, political, and technological transformations have brought a higher risk of escalating conflicts in the medium and long terms.

Globalisation, particularly, has challenged policy processes that were once defined to be the exclusive domain of state authority, making it additionally difficult for governments to manage complex conflicts.

At the same time, rising popular expectations, increasing competition over resources and opportunities, and sharpening perceptions of inequality and injustice are leading to increased tensions and, in some cases, violence in many parts of the African continent.

Therefore, transformation processes currently underway in various domains in Africa, particularly in countries with ongoing violent conflicts, provide an opportune moment to build a comprehensive conflict management framework at the local, national, regional, and continental levels, which identifies innovative ways to bridge the divide between the government and the disaffected groups, or between conflicting groups.

This paper is situated within this problematic and it explores the role of national, regional and continental organisations, and other stakeholders in the process of building a comprehensive conflict management framework.

It argues that there is a need of an improved capacity for management of conflicts through the strengthening of various actors (national, regional, and continental organisations and political will) which is critical in order to ensure the continued consolidation of democracy and to maintain peace and political, social and economic stability on which future prosperity depends upon.

In terms of structure, the first section briefly examines the causes of conflicts in Africa, followed by the limitations and the main gaps identified on the conflict management frameworks that have been adopted at various levels, and the lastly, but equally important, the possible way forward in terms of building a comprehensive conflict management framework.

In terms of research methods, it draws on the review of existing literature and on the baseline data gathered from countries with ongoing violent conflicts.

## **2. Causes of conflicts in Africa**

There has been a considerable amount of literature on the root causes of conflicts in Africa. Academics, policy makers and strategists have devoted much time in searching and mapping its structural causes. This section briefly outlines the main aspects that have been discussed.

It is assumed that following the end of the Col War Africa witnessed a widespread of intra societal conflicts which where/are fuelled by increased poverty, illiteracy, and failures on securing the basic social services for the citizens. The aftermath of this scenario was/is the political, social and economic instability that degenerated into insecurity and collapse. Rugumamu adds that, these collapsed states brought consequences to the neighboring countries, whereby the flows of refugees heightened ethnic conflicts and diplomatic conflicts<sup>1</sup>.

The causes of conflict in Africa are varied: Anarfi points out that some authors find their origins on the legacy of colonialism and the cold war. Others, emanates from bad governance, ethnicity, ecological disasters. However, many scholars have focused more to the multi-ethnic composition of the African continent is the root cause of conflicts and violent conflicts<sup>2</sup>. According to Conversi, the creation of ethnic communities often involves competition and conflict for political power,

economic benefits, and social status between competing elite, class, and leadership groups both within and among different ethnic categories<sup>3</sup>. Looking at ethnicity as cause of conflict and violence, Irobi mentions that ethnic conflict is, “psychological, especially the fear and insecurity of ethnic groups during transition. It has been opined that extremists build upon these fears to polarise the society. Additionally, memories of past traumas magnify these anxieties. These interactions produce a toxic brew of distrust and suspicion that leads to ethnic violence”<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore Irobi stresses that ‘In Africa where poverty and deprivation are becoming endemic, mostly as a result of distributive injustice, ethnicity remains an effective means of survival and mobilization. Ethnic groups that form for economic reasons, easily disband after achieving their objectives’<sup>5</sup>

Although the multi-ethnic composition of Africa must be taken into account, Arnafi mentions that, several studies have shown that poverty, failed political institutions and reliability in natural resources are the main root causes of conflict and violent conflict in Africa. These factors interacting with ethnic dominance and ethnic diversity, the legacy of colonialism (artificial boundaries, administrative policy of divide and rule which in most cases favoured a particular ethnic group) the Cold War legacy which led to the proliferation of smaller arms<sup>6</sup>. Rugumuru points out that among the structural causes of conflict in Africa there are political, economic and structural patterns such as state repression, lack of political participation, poor governance performance, the distribution of wealth, the ethnic make-up of the society and the history of the inter-group relations<sup>7</sup>.

It is important to note the existence of another potential source of conflict and violence conflict in Africa: migration. Some countries contain vast geographical areas and long borders and coastlines that need to be controlled. Seeking to defend their sovereignty and security, states have devoted resources and attention to stem migration to stem irregular migration. The security agencies have limited resources and insufficient technical capacity to fulfill this task<sup>8</sup>, making it, therefore, difficult to control the movement of people across these long land and sea borders. Also, in one hand, in some countries, community relations’ considerations limit the willingness of authorities to undertake rigorous and intrusive actions against migrants with irregular status. On the other hand, generally, the growing sophistication of organized crime on the continent has not been matched by an increase on the sophistication, skill and resources of the police.

The growth of irregular migration is facilitated by the existence of criminal networks that profit from migrant smuggling and from human trafficking. It is important to note that many civilian population were militarized and armed in the recent years and the presence of large numbers of firearms on the region affected by violent conflicts creates opportunities for lawlessness and it will increase the violence associated with the criminal activities. Other factors that affect are the ‘weak state capacity, including porous borders, poor custom control, weak civil societies, corrupt governments that are characterised by clientelism and patronage, particularly those who experienced civil wars and public unrest and transition to democracy’<sup>9</sup>.

However, probably the most sounding causes would be poverty, exclusion and inequality. As Arnafi argues “politics of poverty also emerged as a major source of conflict in Africa. The unequal trade corporate interests, bad governance and the immense burden of debt have crippled the development potentials and trapped the continent under conflicts. When poverty and deprivation are the norm among population, especially among the youth, it paves the way to rebellions”<sup>10</sup>. In the same line Uvin mentions that when the poor are denied decent and dignified lives because of their basic physical and mental capacities are constrained by hunger, poverty, inequality, and exclusion, fuels the conditions for structural violence. As a result, this type of violence can be built into the structure of a society<sup>11</sup>.

Lastly, but equally important is globalization. At this regard, according to Arnafi, “globalisation has been linked to conflicts in Africa due to the rapid and radical changes which leads to unequal

competition associated with it. Globalisation fuels conflict and violence when it produces inequality, poverty, environmental destruction and unprecedented concentration of economic power for a few while the majority are marginalized and excluded”<sup>12</sup> Kaldor points out that globalisation has implications on the future of territorially based sovereignty. The new wars take place on the context of erosion of the autonomy of the state that, usually, is accompanied with the erosion of monopoly of legitimate organised violence. In the context of globalisation, ideological and territorial cleavages of an earlier era have been supplanted by an emerging political cleavage between cosmopolitanism based on inclusive, universalist, multicultural values, and the politics of particularist identities. This cleavage can be explained on the growing divide between those who are part of the global process and those who are excluded<sup>13</sup>.

### **3. Main gaps or limitation**

Some authors stress that what concur to conflict management framework’ limitations and fragility at regional and continental levels is the genesis of these organisations. For instance, Olonisakin argues that on the early 1990s Africa was not ready for the responsibilities on the post-Cold War security needs. As he mentions, “the OAU, for example, was founded on the principles of ‘sovereignty’ and ‘pan-Africanism’ that, at the time of its inception, appeared to be the logical reaction to Africa’s colonial past”<sup>14</sup>. As a consequence, the continent witnessed the proliferation of autocratic leaders, who substituted state security and interest for regime security and self-interest, and ultimately the “OAU’s preference for sovereignty and non-intervention in the internal affairs of member states rendered it powerless to address situations of poor governance and the abuse of human rights within many member states that threatened to erupt into violent conflict in some cases”<sup>15</sup>. At regional and subregional levels the organisations were founded with development and economic purposes and did not have within their agenda security or conflict management as their main priorities<sup>16</sup>.

On the other hand, Franke argues that under the African Union (AU), member states enjoy the privileges of sovereignty such as the non-interference in its internal affairs only as long as they fulfill their responsibility to protect their citizens. If, however, states fail, for whatever reasons, to honor this responsibility, the AU reserves itself “the right to intervene [in a member state] pursuant to a decision of the Assembly in respect of grave circumstances, namely war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity. Where Articles II and III of the Charter OAU had placed a premium on sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in member states’ internal affairs, the AU’s Constitutive Act imposes important limitations on state sovereignty. The simple acceptance that sovereignty is not completely inviolable represented a major change”<sup>17</sup>.

In the recent time Africa’s regional organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) or the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have taken important steps aimed at establishing regional conflict management mechanisms and using them in regional peacekeeping or mediation activities.

In fact, ECOWAS has been involved in operations in Western Africa (Liberia 1990, Sierra Leone 1997-8 and Liberia 2003) are certainly the most well-known such activities, the 1998 intervention in Lesotho by SADC, the successful mediation of IGAD in the Sudanese civil war or the ongoing mission of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) in the Central African Republic are equally insightful signs of the growing potential (and willingness) of Africa’s regional organisations to deal with the continent’s manifold security problems. By building the ASF (Africa Standby Force) on regional pillars, the African Union profits from these experiences and ensures that the regional organisations feel ownership in the process of establishing a continental standby force<sup>18</sup>.

Research on conflict management framework in Africa has shown that prior critical aspects have to be addressed in order to become more effective and feasible. Discussing the main gaps on the frameworks at regional and continental levels, Olonisakin mentions that despite the strengths and achievements, there still inherent weaknesses of regional actors. As he points out, the regional actors lack objectivity, neutrality and impartiality “given that they may have vested interests in the resolution or course of a conflict in their neighbourhood. This is almost always true of individual or group actors, whether they are acting alone or under the umbrella of an organisation. As a result, their credibility may be in question, when they respond to conflict or crises in their backyard”<sup>19</sup>

Another aspects he points out is what he calls “side payments” whereby the bigger or richer an organisation or its leadership, the greater will be its chances to overcome this problem. This, according to Olonisakin, “is one of the few post-Cold War situations where the conflict in a region holds enormous interest for states outside of the region. In this case, the US was seen as a credible mediator and it was able to offer side payments to the conflicting parties in the form of promises to underwrite some of the costs that will naturally result from implementing a settlement”<sup>20</sup>.

One of the major gaps that this paper identifies is the absence or insipient presence of a strong civilian component within the structures of the organisations (at various levels) and on the African Peace missions that would voice out the points of view of the excluded and voiceless within the societies.

#### **4. Tentative way forward**

Olonisakin identifies three main constraints that need to be dealt with in order to draw manageable and feasible conflict management frameworks: Firstly is structural where he mentions that regional/subregional organisations which were founded with development and economic purposes have now to deal and play a major role on conflict management. Even though these organisations have achieved some success, it is evident that the structures of these organisations are unsuitable for the roles that have embarked upon. On the other side, the post-Cold War brought a new challenge to regional organisations and each one has attempted to address crises in their own neighbourhoods, raising concerns about neutrality and impartiality between the actors and entities concerned<sup>21</sup>.

Secondly, Olonisakin argues that regional and subregional organisations lack financial and human resources, which is crucial to deal with escalating regional conflicts. Due to these constraints “regional or subregional organisations are more likely to respond to conflicts when there is a lead nation, whereby a country with the human and material resources to take the lead in the initiation of such operations”<sup>22</sup>

Thirdly, there are fears of the small countries, which are reluctant “to accept the leadership of hegemonic states for fear that they will always seek hegemony in their neighbourhood”. This situation has implications in regions/subregions without leading countries particularly in time of crisis. On the other hand there is a risk of hegemonic countries “become stumbling blocks in a conflict resolution process if they are seen as being partial, as having too much vested interest in the conflict, or indeed, if they are not inclusive in their approach”<sup>23</sup>.

On the other hand, in multiethnic, plural societies, policies of moderation associated with liberal-democratic political traditions can encourage flexibility and mutual adaptation among conflicting ethnic groups. According to Zolberg *et al*, “relevant strategies focusing on political framework in which ethnic conflict occurs can take basically two forms: 1) a recognition of existing ethnic cleavages through a process of institutional reforms; 2) a weakening of existing ethnic cleavages by providing incentives for the formation of new groups across ethnic lines or the fragmentation of existing groups. Ethnic conflicts can also be modified by various distributive policies designed to change the balance of socio-economic opportunities and rewards”<sup>24</sup>. Furthermore Zolberg *et al*

mention that “ethnic group leadership itself, whether the majority or minority, must show moderation. An ethnic community that attempts to utilise the state apparatus primarily for its own benefit will encourage fear and rebellion among excluded communities. This has been the origin of most contemporary secessionist conflicts”<sup>25</sup>.

In societies divided by sharp socio-economic inequalities, policies of redistribution and social justice in a social-democrat tradition are obvious strategies to reduce fundamental conflict in the longer run. More immediately and concurrently, political reforms are essential to accommodate new social forces that emerge in the economic development process<sup>26</sup>.

As Olonisakin argues, one critical issue is that regional policy frameworks must move beyond the military solution in conflict management and envisage partnerships with a cross-section of actors that can generate more security and development. On the other side, these organisations in order to successfully achieve their goals require a sound knowledge base within African institutions<sup>27</sup>.

Further on Olonisakin mentions, “regional and subregional organisations tend to have specific advantages over actors from outside these regions. These organisations need to improve and sustain their capacity to cope with current conflicts”<sup>28</sup>. To achieve this goal there is a need of more effective capacity to anticipate and predict the shape and the nature of conflicts. This effective capacity can be reached through the strengthening of their capacity on early warning and preventive actions which should combine historical, social, political and humanitarian information in order to forecast the dynamics of a particular conflicts and the instruments needed to address any situation before it degenerates in crisis. As Olonisakin stresses that such capacity is crucial if there is a will of prevent the escalating of conflicts and ensuring stability and development.<sup>29</sup>

It is important to note that in order to be productive, prevention needs to be part of a policy makers’ overall policy planning process. On the one hand, there are good reasons to favour a more *short term, ad hoc* interplay between states and institutions. On the other hand, there is a need for more long term structural approaches to prevention and the institutionalisation of conflict prevention through capacity building and training. There are simply not enough resources available to meet every potentially violent conflict with an operational response in every instance.

Taking into consideration Olonisakin’s remark, “political will would be easier to muster among regional actors if and when the need arises for local conflict management. A second crucial advantage that regional and subregional actors possess is that they often have a superior knowledge of their regions, the prevailing cultures, the peoples, and their idiosyncrasies. This factor becomes all the more important in conflict situations where an interlocutor’s understanding of the people, as well as the issues contained in the conflict will often go a long way to determine the success of their action”<sup>30</sup>.

Lastly, working relationships have to be forged between regional organisations, the African Union and multilateral organisation such as the United Nations; also it would be useful to bridge the gap between regional organisations and other regional organisations; and between organs, departments and institutions of the African Union and regional organisations and other national and local institutions. Where such relationships exist at rudimentary levels, they need to be improved dramatically; conflict prevention has to move closer to the local level; or, at the very least, national and international efforts have to be well tuned into local needs and invest in local capacity building; conflict prevention, at all levels, has to be sustainable (and has to be sustained) to assure meaningful results.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper attempted to shed some light on the role that regional and continental organisations have to play in order to prevent and act in situations of eruption of conflicts and violent conflicts

across the continent. It has shown that conflicts in Africa have diverse causes and patterns, which range from poverty, exclusion, inequality, ethnicity, globalisation, colonial legacy, and migration amongst the most relevant.

It has argued that the lack of financial and human resources, and legal concerns has been limiting a more effective action/deployment of effective measures to tackle violent conflicts in various regions of Africa. In part, as has been shown, it is due to lack of inclusion of civil society organisation within the structures of various organisations and when it happens, it is not representative.

Finally it calls for a strengthening the capacity of these organisations on early warning preventive actions through the combination of historical, sociological and political information and the inclusion of civil society organisations that can voice out the concerns of the people concerned.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Rugumamu, S.M. Conflict Management in Africa: Diagnosis of Current Practices and Future Prospects. Ethiopia 2002. . Available on: <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/CAFRAD/UNPAN009062.pdf> Site accessed on 15th December 2007 p.2
- <sup>2</sup> Anarfi, J. From Conflict to Conflict: Migration, Population Displacement and Refugee Flows: Whither Africa?2004 Available on: [http://www.barcelona2004.org/esp/banco\\_del\\_conocimiento/docs/PO\\_44\\_EN\\_ANARFI.pdf](http://www.barcelona2004.org/esp/banco_del_conocimiento/docs/PO_44_EN_ANARFI.pdf) Site accessed on 19th December 2007
- <sup>3</sup> Conversi, D. Nationalism, Boundaries and Violence” *Millenium* Vol.28, 1999. p. 560
- <sup>4</sup> Irobi, E. G. Ethnic Conflict Management in Africa: A Comparative Case Study of Nigeria and South Africa. May 2005. Available on: [http://www.beyondintractability.org/case\\_studies/nigeria\\_south-africa.jsp?nid=6720](http://www.beyondintractability.org/case_studies/nigeria_south-africa.jsp?nid=6720) Site accessed on 10th December 2007
- <sup>5</sup> Irobi, E.G. *Op cit*
- <sup>6</sup> Anarfi, J. *Op cit*. For more details on the legacy of colonialism and the artificiality of the borders also see: Abraham, G. “Africa and its boundaries, a legal view: from colonialism to the African Union” in Clapham, C *et al* (ed) *Big African States*. 2001. Pp.273-290; Asiwaju, A.I. *Artificial Boundaries*, New York, Civiletis International, 1990; Asiwaju, A.I. *Boundaries and African Integration: Essays In Comparative History and Policy Analysis*. Lagos, Panaf Publishing, 2003; Breytenbach, Willie, “The History and Destiny of National Minorities in the African Renaissance: The Case for Better Boundaries”, in Malegapuru William Makgoba (ed), *African Renaissance: the New Struggle*, Cape Town, Mafube Publishing, 1999.
- <sup>7</sup> Rugumamu, S.M. *Op cit*
- <sup>8</sup> Wannenburg, G. “Africa’s big states and organised crime” In Clapham, C *et al* (ed) *Big African States*. 2001. p. 248
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*
- <sup>10</sup> Anarfi, J. *Op cit*
- <sup>11</sup> Uvin, P. *Aiding Violence: The development Enterprise in Rwanda*. 1998. Kumarian Press. p.103
- <sup>12</sup> Anarfi, J. *Op cit*
- <sup>13</sup> See Kaldor, M. 199. *New and Old Wars: Organised violence in a Global Era*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 6
- <sup>14</sup> Olonisakin, F. “Conflict Management in Africa: the role of OAU and sub-regional organisations in Africa” In *Building Stability in Africa: Challenges for the New Millennium*, February 2000 Monograph No 46 Also available online on: <http://www.iss.co.za/pubs/Monographs/No46/Conflict.html> Site accessed on 3rd January 2008
- <sup>15</sup> Olonisakin, F. “Conflict Management in Africa: the role of OAU and sub-regional organisations in Africa” *Op cit*
- <sup>16</sup> At the subregional level, there are several organisations whose main purpose at formation did not centre around conflict resolution and management. Among the most prominent of the subregional organisations are the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) where created for economic and development purposes.
- <sup>17</sup> Franke, B. “Enabling a continent to Help Itself: U.S. Military capacity Building and Africa’s Emerging Architecture” In *Strategic Insights*, Vol. VI, Issue 1 (January 2007). Available on: <http://www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/2007/Jan/frankeJan07.asp>
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*
- <sup>19</sup> Olonisakin, F. “Conflict Management in Africa: the role of OAU and sub-regional organisations in Africa” *Op cit*
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*
- <sup>24</sup> Zolberg, A. R; Suhrke, A; Aguayo, S. *Escape from violence: conflict and the refugee crisis in the developing world*. 1989. Oxford University Press. p. 263
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibidem* p. 264
- <sup>27</sup> Olonisakin, F. *The Future of Conflict Management in Africa*. 2007. Available on: [http://www.odi.org.uk/events/G8\\_07/opinions/olonisakin.pdf](http://www.odi.org.uk/events/G8_07/opinions/olonisakin.pdf) Site accessed on 3rd January 2008
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*
- <sup>29</sup> Olonisakin, F. *The Future of Conflict Management in Africa*. 2007. Available on: [http://www.odi.org.uk/events/G8\\_07/opinions/olonisakin.pdf](http://www.odi.org.uk/events/G8_07/opinions/olonisakin.pdf) Site accessed on 3rd January 2008

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<sup>30</sup> Olonisakin, F. "Conflict Management in Africa: the role of OAU and sub-regional organisations in Africa" *Op cit*

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