Sustainable Regional Peacebuilding in Africa: Conceptual Explorations and Practical Experiences
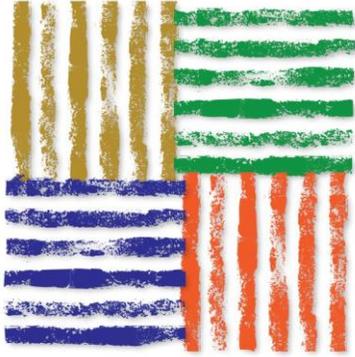
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MIASA Working Paper No 2025(2)

University of Ghana, Legon
November 2025

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MIASA Working Papers 2025(2)

Edited by the
Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa (MIASA)

WP coordination: Agnes Schneider-Musah
Layout and formatting: Luca Hanenberg
All MIASA working papers are available online and free of charge on the website:
https://ugspace.ug.edu.gh

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To cite: Antonia Witt, Linda Darkwa, Christof Hartmann, Tony Karbo & Chido Mutangadura. 2025. Sustainable Regional Peacebuilding in Africa: Conceptual Explorations and Practical Experiences. MIASA Working Paper No 2025(2), online: hyperlink.

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List of Abbreviations

AfHA	African Humanitarian Agency
AHON	African Humanitarian Organisations Network
AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
ARS	Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia
ASI	African Solidarity Initiative
ASP	African Standby Force
ATMIS	AU Transition Mission in Somalia
AU	African Union
ECOMIB	ECOWAS Stabilization Mission in Guinea Bissau
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ECPF	ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Network
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defense Force
ESF	ECOWAS Standby Force
FGS	Federal Government of Somalia
FRSD	Fund for Regional Stabilization and Development
HDP	Humanitarian-Development-Peace nexus
ICU	Islamic Courts Union
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
LCBC	Lake Chad Bassin Commission
MIASA	Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa
MINUSCA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNJTF	Multinational Joint Task Force
PCRD	Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development
PSC	Peace and Security Council
PSOs	Peace Support Operations

PSPs	Peace Strengthening Projects
QIPs	Quick Impact Projects
RSC	Regional Climate Strategy
RSS	Lake Chad Bassin Region
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SAMIM	SADC Mission to Mozambique
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SFG	Somali Federal Government
SMS	Somali Ministry of Finance
SNSF	Somali National Security Forces
TCC	Troop-contributing countries
TNG	Transitional National Government
UN	United Nations
UNAMID	United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan
UNPOS	United Nations Political Office to Somalia
UNSOM	United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia
UNTMIS	UN Transitional Assistance Mission in Somalia

Sustainable Regional Peacebuilding in Africa: Conceptual Explorations and Practical Experiences

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Abstract

In the field of peacebuilding, sustainability has become a ubiquitous term, used widely by both scholars and peacebuilding practitioners. But what is sustainable peacebuilding and, by contrast, what would unsustainable peacebuilding look like? This working paper engages in both a conceptual exploration of different approaches and understandings of sustainable peacebuilding and in an examination – although cursory – of different experiences in realising sustainable peacebuilding in Africa through regional frameworks. We understand sustainable peacebuilding broadly as comprising at least four different dimensions: temporal, structural, ecological, and processual. The paper shows that African regional organisations increasingly reference "sustainable peacebuilding," yet its meaning and application remain ambiguous across missions and practices, with temporal aspects more readily adopted than structural, ecological, or process-oriented dimensions. Achieving genuinely sustainable peace will require deeper engagement with local communities, clearer political strategies, integration of environmental considerations, and more inclusive conceptual foundations shaped by African epistemologies rather than predominantly Western frameworks.

Keywords: peacebuilding, sustainability, peace support operations, humanitarian-development-nexus, regional organisations

Résumé

Dans le domaine de la consolidation de la paix, la durabilité est devenue un terme omniprésent, largement employé tant par les universitaires que par les praticiens du secteur. Mais qu'entend-on exactement par consolidation de la paix durable et, à l'inverse, à quoi ressemble une consolidation de la paix non durable ? Ce Working Paper propose à la fois une exploration conceptuelle des différentes approches et compréhensions de la consolidation de la paix durable et un examen – quoique sommaire – des diverses expériences de mise en œuvre de cette notion en Afrique à travers des cadres régionaux.
Nous concevons la consolidation de la paix durable, de façon globale, comme englobant au moins quatre dimensions distinctes : temporelle, structurelle, écologique et processuelle. Le papier montre que les organisations régionales africaines font de plus en plus référence à la « consolidation de la paix durable », mais que sa signification et son application restent ambiguës selon les missions et les

pratiques, la dimension temporelle étant plus aisément adoptée que les dimensions structurelles, écologiques ou orientées processus.

Réaliser une paix véritablement durable nécessitera un engagement plus approfondi avec les communautés locales, des stratégies politiques plus claires, l'intégration des considérations environnementales et des fondements conceptuels plus inclusifs, façonnés par les épistémologies africaines plutôt que par des cadres majoritairement occidentaux.

Mots-clés: consolidation de la paix, durabilité, opérations de soutien à la paix, nexus humanitaire-développement, organisations régionales

1. Introduction

In the field of peacebuilding, *sustainability* has become a ubiquitous term, used widely by both scholars and peacebuilding practitioners. Its prevalence is such that one might assume that peacebuilding cannot, or should not, be done in any other way; that it is inherently meant to be sustainable. But what does the sustainability of peacebuilding actually refer to? What is sustainable peacebuilding and, by contrast, what would unsustainable peacebuilding look like? And beyond this conceptual debate, how can we practically build sustainable peace, or build peace sustainably, especially given the complex web of actors involved in peacebuilding today?

On the African continent, an important factor in this web of actors are African regional organisations like the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which are increasingly involved in building peace and resolving conflicts (Adetula et al. 2020; Bereketeab 2025). In so doing, these African regional organisations have also adopted sustainable peacebuilding as a guiding framework for how peace should be built on the continent (Kuwali 2022a). For instance, in its 2006 policy framework for Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development (PCRD), the AU describes it as "a comprehensive set of measures that seek to: address the needs of countries emerging from conflict, including the needs of affected populations; prevent escalation of disputes; avoid relapse into violence; address the root causes of conflict; and consolidate sustainable peace" (AU 2006, 4; Khadiagala 2021). Similarly, the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework states that "ECOWAS Member States have a responsibility to ensure sustainable peace and security by implementing measures and initiatives that go beyond violence management" (ECOWAS 2008, 11). Through the ECOWAS Peace Fund, the organisation has the objective to "promote sustainable peace and human security across the West African region".[1] In this sense, African regional peacebuilding today is not only about addressing the most immediate challenges to peace and security on the continent, but also about doing so in a sustainable way, preventing future conflicts and creating the conditions for long-term peaceful societal coexistence (Kuwali 2022b).

Contrary to this widespread talk about sustainable peacebuilding, however, the diverse peace and security practices of African regional organisations have been criticised for predominantly focusing on the most immediate challenges and for favouring short-term, top-down measures at the expense of the more long-term, integrative and comprehensive approaches laid out in the policy frameworks (Zondi 2017; Witt 2020; Khadiagala 2021).

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[1] https://peacefund.ecowas.int/abouts (last access 19 August 2025).

We propose that achieving sustainable peacebuilding is difficult for two main reasons. Firstly, sustainable peacebuilding is political. Despite the technical language used in policy frameworks and guides, peacebuilding is an inherently political project. The politics of peacebuilding begin with the very meaning of peace and how it should be built, and the unequal power different actors hold to shape the dominant peacebuilding agendas (Curtis and Dzinesa 2012; Tieku et al. 2022b). Sustainable peacebuilding is not beyond these politics but sits at the very heart. Excavating the various struggles over the meanings and approaches to sustainable peacebuilding is therefore key to understanding how sustainable peacebuilding can or cannot be realised.

While in this paper we employ and explore the concept of (sustainable) peacebuilding, we acknowledge that the concept itself has often been read as part of a particular international peacebuilding project – the liberal peace – and its associated forms and justifications of intervention, which have been widely critiqued in both academia and practice (Sabaratnam 2013; Richmond and Mac Ginty 2015). However, we do not view sustainable peacebuilding per se as an inevitable or natural ally of the liberal peace. Indeed, sustainability has been an effective means of critiquing liberal peacebuilding, exposing its often short-term, imposing, and extractive tendencies. In this regard, sustainability thinking has also been part of African, particularly decolonial, critiques of the liberal peace (see, for instance, Zondi 2017). For this reason, we take the political character of peacebuilding seriously and therefore retain peacebuilding (without adjectives) as a generally open concept.

Secondly, achieving sustainable peacebuilding is difficult because peacebuilding is an intersectional endeavour. It requires the engagement of diverse actors and agencies on different scales, from the international and regional to the local level. Building sustainable peace is therefore not only dependent on the policy frameworks or capacities of regional organisations but also requires their effective linkage to broader infrastructures for peace, whether through national institutions, community-level practices, or global funding frameworks (de Coning 2016; Odendaal 2021; Tieku et al. 2022a).

Against this background, this working paper engages in both a conceptual exploration of different approaches and understandings of sustainable peacebuilding and in an examination – although cursory – of different experiences in realising sustainable peacebuilding in Africa through regional frameworks. For that purpose, we understand sustainable peacebuilding broadly as comprising at least four different dimensions. Firstly, sustainable peacebuilding has a *temporal dimension*, referring to something that is meant to last. This reflects the most generic meaning of the term, denoting "the quality of being

able to continue over a period of time" (see also Caradonna 2022, 8).[2] In this sense, the term *sustainable peace*, as the outcome of sustainable peacebuilding, is often used interchangeably with durable peace (Annan 2000; Ali and Matthews 2004) or stable peace (Boulding 1978; Kacowicz 2000).

Secondly, sustainable peacebuilding has a *structural dimension*, referring to the search for addressing the "root causes" of conflicts and transforming conflictual relationships into cooperative ones (Galtung 1976; Lederach 1998). As we will explicate in this working paper, this dimension lies at the very heart of classical conflict transformation and peacebuilding theory, which even predates the current ubiquitous usage of the term sustainability.

Thirdly, and more recently, an *ecological dimension* has been added to sustainable peacebuilding, which builds on a more substantial understanding of sustainability, referring to "the quality of causing little or no damage to the environment".[3] In this sense, sustainable peacebuilding describes approaches in which the "management of environmental issues is integrated in and can support conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution and recovery" (Ide et al. 2021, 3).

Fourthly, sustainable peacebuilding also has a *processual dimension*, referring to the sustainability of the process through which peace is built and maintained. This involves, among other things, the development of trustful relationships among actors and the investment of tangible and non-tangible resources to uphold peacebuilding efforts over time (Olonisakin et al. 2021; Jarstad et al. 2023).

This working paper presents the findings of the Interdisciplinary Fellow Group on "Sustainable Regional Peacebuilding" at the Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa (MIASA) at the University of Ghana, whose members have served as MIASA fellows for a period of four months. Our multidimensional understanding of sustainable peacebuilding outlined above aligns with the conceptual framework advanced by MIASA under its overarching theme of "Sustainable Governance". The Institute's research programme addresses "sustainable governance as a theoretical and conceptual challenge", aiming to create space for "questioning concepts and for contributing to innovative theory-building". Building on these propositions, this working paper seeks to contribute to what we feel is an overdue conceptual debate on sustainable peacebuilding in Africa and to provide a better understanding of current practices, including successes and challenges, in realising sustainable peacebuilding through African regional organisations.

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[2] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sustainable (last access 4 December 2023).
[3] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sustainable (last access 4 December 2023).

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: In the second chapter, we outline the conceptual roots of sustainable peacebuilding, which are to be found in a diverse set of often disconnected scholarly debates, and examine their repercussions for peacebuilding policy and practice. In the third chapter, we focus on three arenas in which sustainable peacebuilding is currently realised – or not – by African regional organisations. By analysing peacebuilding within robust peace operations, the humanitarian–development–peace nexus and localisation within African peace operations, we explore how sustainable peacebuilding is interpreted and operationalised in the practices of the AU and ECOWAS. In the conclusion, we provide a concise summary of the main contribution of this working paper and suggest avenues for further research.

2. What Is Sustainable Peacebuilding?

Despite the ubiquitous use of the term, there is no coherent conceptual literature on what sustainable peacebuilding actually entails. On one hand, the term is often used without deeper engagement, with "sustainable" becoming an almost automatic addition to concepts such as "peace" or "peacebuilding". As Caradonna (2022, 2) notes, this reflects a broader phenomenon beyond the field of peacebuilding: "sustainability is no longer a buzzword because it has become so normalized and institutionalized." On the other hand, various strands of literature over the past decades have engaged with the term, directly or indirectly. However, these strands are often scattered, disconnected and rarely interact with one another. The conceptual debate is further complicated by the proliferation of related concepts – such as sustainable development, resilience, adaptive peacebuilding, or peace ecology – each with its own conceptual traditions and debates (Amster 2015; de Coning et al. 2023). Moreover, "sustainable peacebuilding" has travelled between academia and policy circles, making it sometimes difficult to distinguish its character as an analytical or diagnostic concept from that of a political strategy. Concepts can thus "get a life of their own" when "used in various contexts and with different meanings, not necessarily conveying the meaning and theoretical depth that were intended when the concept was initially theorized" (Bramsen and Hagemann 2023, 1964; Bueger and Bethke 2014). For the purpose of this working paper, the following section provides an initial overview by examining three main sources of conceptual work on sustainable peacebuilding – classical peace theory, environmental peacebuilding and UN policy debates – highlighting different understandings, foci and traditions in defining what sustainable peacebuilding is.

Classical Theories of Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding

The concepts of "sustainable peace" or "sustainable peacebuilding" do not feature prominently in classical peace theories. While the idea can be traced back to many different political traditions worldwide, the starting point of contemporary peace theory is often attributed to Johan Galtung and his distinction between "positive" and "negative" peace. For Galtung (1969, 183), peace was defined in terms of the absence of violence. He distinguished negative peace, as the absence of direct personal violence, from positive peace, as the absence of indirect structural violence and the realisation of social justice. Negative peace could be attained by incentivising actors to manage conflict peacefully, while positive peace required removing unjust structures of domination and marginalisation, which would otherwise breed new violence. Only positive peace was thus likely to be stable, and therefore sustainable in a temporal sense, although Galtung did not use the term "sustainable" himself.

While Galtung drew on long-standing philosophical and theological traditions that understand peace as a just social order, his conceptualisation was seminal in shaping the way subsequent generations of peace and conflict researchers conceptualised peace and its preconditions. Moreover, Galtung's work was important in highlighting the processual character of peace by framing peacebuilding as something attainable rather than utopian (Galtung 1969, 185). His idea that peace ultimately requires more fundamental transformations than merely the cessation of (personal) violence was taken up later by many authors. One particularly interesting approach was initiated by John Paul Lederach (1998), who, from an explicitly practice-based perspective, emphasised bottom-up peacebuilding and conflict transformation. Unlike Galtung, Lederach was less interested in advancing peace theory and more focused on identifying the conditions necessary for sustainable peacebuilding in practice. Notably, he specifically used the term "sustainable", referring to the conditions that make peace enduring.

While Galtung's empirical reference point was the Cold War and global conflict, Lederach's analysis focused on the many "divided societies" in which protracted violent conflicts emerged the necessity to work with elites, but he stressed that rebuilding destroyed after the end of the Cold War and where external interventions were seen as the main strategy. Lederach therefore highlighted the importance of local contexts and local needs in peacebuilding, with a particular emphasis on sustainable reconciliation within societies (see also Roeder and Rothchild 2005). His conceptual perspective rested on the view that people themselves hold the potential for peace, leading him to foreground cultural and societal factors, especially indigenous resources, as key drivers of sustainable peace. Ultimately, only local actors from within the conflict context would be able to build sustainable peace in their own countries.

Lederach did not ignore relationships at local or community level is a necessary component of peacebuilding: "Constructing a peace process … requires an operative frame of reference that takes into consideration the legitimacy, uniqueness, and interdependency of the needs and resources of the grassroots, middle range, and top level" (Lederach 1998, 60). He also introduced the concept of "infrastructures for peace" as a multilayered web of institutions, actors and norms that sustain peace, within which differing perspectives on peace and peacebuilding may collide. Lederach's approach became foundational for what was later labelled as a "local turn" in peacebuilding theory, and, as a result, "the recognition that local actors should be in the driving seat of peacebuilding efforts is firmly established in theory and practice" (Paffenholz 2016, 210).

Within debates that view peacebuilding as a normative project, criticism of the liberal peace and its universalised norms led to a series of attempts to develop alternative concepts identified as key prerequisites for sustaining peace. In one way or another, however, these conceptualisations remained closely tied to Lederach's original idea of sustainable peacebuilding, which already emphasised that peace cannot be 'built' from the outside.

Developing these lines of thought further, de Coning argues for a strong emphasis on resilient social institutions and capacities for self-organisation. "The best way to ensure sustainable peace is to encourage and facilitate the capacity of a society to organise itself so that it develops the resilient institutions necessary to manage its internal tensions, competition and conflicts" (de Coning 2016, 174). The concern with identifying and supporting the political and social capacities that sustain peace led others to highlight the need for resilient national social contracts (McCandless 2020), integrating conceptual strands on political settlements and social cohesion into the peacebuilding literature. McCandless's strong emphasis on "national" politics marked a clear departure from earlier theories but, as outlined below, closely mirrored developments in UN policy thinking. Turan (2023, 2) has, finally, taken up Galtung's idea of structural violence by defining "sustainable positive peace as the presence of horizontal equalities among collectivities, building on the consensus in the vast majority of the literature that collective grievances (a sense of social injustices) due to horizontal inequalities across identity groups constitute the main drivers of intra-state armed conflict".

Throughout the last decades, peace and conflict theories have focused primarily on peacebuilding as a general concept and its relevance in the African context (Curtis and Dzinesa 2012; Aubyn 2018; Aning 2024). Building on Galtung and Lederach, most of these theories converge around two related ideas: that a sustainable peace requires drawing on resources and institutions which exist within conflict-affected societies, and that it must necessarily address the "root causes" of conflicts while transforming conflictual relationships into cooperative ones.

Environmental Peacebuilding

As a general concept, sustainability is most closely connected to questions of environmental change, global warming, and the negative effects of humans' excessive use of natural resources. As summarised by Caradonna (2022, 8), "nearly all of the definitions of sustainability that have circulated in recent years emphasize an ecological point of view— the notion that human society and economy are intimately connected to the natural environment". However, sustainability refers to more than just the environmental conditions of human existence: "Rather than viewing society and the environment as separate or even antagonistic spheres, the concept of sustainability assumes that humans and their economic systems are indelibly linked" (Caradonna 2022, 8). Sustainability is therefore often understood as a triangle encompassing the environment, the economy and social justice. It thus shares similarities with Galtung's concept of positive peace, while also reproducing its potential conceptual vagueness (Simangan et al. 2021).

The linkages between environmental factors and peace have been addressed most prominently in the field of environmental peacebuilding. This growing body of literature explores both "environmental risks of conflict and environmental opportunities of peace" (Ide et al. 2021, 1). The first strand concerns the links between environmental degradation and conflict vulnerability, the use of natural resources to finance and sustain violence, and the environmental destruction caused by war and violent conflict. The second strand explores how cooperative relationships can be developed through natural resource management and how such cooperation can have a positive impact on post-war reconstruction. Empirical research has shown that "environmental cooperation can reduce perceived inequalities related to natural resource access and distribution, thereby laying the roots of sustainable peace" (Dresse et al. 2019, 108). The relationship between the environment and peace is thus understood in both positive and negative terms, with environmental peacebuilding primarily seeking to identify the conditions under which a positive linkage between the environment and peace can be established (Dresse et al. 2019, 100; Krampe and Swain 2021).

These linkages are still not fully understood. However, environmental peacebuilding scholarship has contributed significantly to unpacking the complex interdependencies between environmental factors and peacebuilding. Scholars in this field have also highlighted the potentially ambiguous consequences when environmental factors are not fully integrated into a broader understanding of what makes peace sustainable. For instance, Dresse et al. (2019, 3) explain that "many environmental peacebuilding initiatives focus on the market value of environmental resources and seek to derive win-win solutions though economic recovery and the creation of livelihoods ... Such initiatives are not necessarily sustainable in the long run because they might not

correspond to local capacities and priorities … They might also fail to account for the multifaceted, long-term nature of environmental problems and the social, cultural and political identities that are vested in the immaterial values of natural resources". This further illustrates that a simplistic equation of sustainability with environmental concerns is misleading if the aim is to build peace that both endures and addresses the structural causes of conflict.

In summary, scholarship on environmental peacebuilding conceptually expands the classical peace theories, including those of Galtung and Lederach, in two ways: by factoring in the environment as an increasingly important source of both structural and personal violence, and by broadening the conception of peaceful relationships as conditions for sustainable peace(building) beyond a human-centric epistemology.

The UN Policy Debates

The idea of sustainable peace evolved not only within academic circles but also circulated and travelled between academic and policy worlds. So how, then, did the policy debate integrate notions of sustainable peacebuilding?

The policy discourse on peacebuilding began largely with Boutros Boutros-Ghali's 1992 *Agenda for Peace*, which defined peacebuilding as post-conflict social and political reconstruction activities "which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict" (Boutros-Ghali 1992, 55). Although these activities were not explicitly framed in relation to sustainability, a key distinction between post-conflict peacebuilding on the one hand, and peacekeeping and peacemaking on the other, was precisely its emphasis on longer-term, society-wide reconciliation and more substantial state-building as necessary elements for preparing sustainable peace.

It was also generally taken for granted that peacebuilding involved interventions by external actors to help war-torn societies to establish the conditions for sustainable peace. The restriction of peacebuilding to a purely post-conflict phase was gradually weakened from the late 1990s onwards, as reflected in UN documents such as the 2000 Brahimi Report. By the early 2000s, conflict prevention and peacebuilding were being used interchangeably within the UN (Tschirgi 2004, 2). Institutionally, the peacebuilding architecture was strengthened with the 2005 creation of three pillars, the UN Peacebuilding Commission, the Peacebuilding Fund, and the Peacebuilding Support Office.

A different strand of sustainability language entered UN thinking with the 2015 review of the peacebuilding architecture, especially through the report of the Advisory Group of Experts, which introduced the concept of sustaining peace as an alternative to

peacebuilding (UN 2015). In April 2016, the General Assembly and the Security Council adopted substantively identical resolutions confirming sustaining peace as the new overarching conceptual framework for building peace (UN General Assembly 2016; UN Security Council 2016).

Sustaining peace marked a departure from earlier thinking in two ways: First, efforts to sustain peace were understood as necessary not only after conflict had broken out but also long beforehand, by preventing conflict and addressing its root causes, with the aim of preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of violence. The previous time-bound and technical framing of post-conflict peacebuilding was thus replaced by a more comprehensive understanding of peacebuilding that encompassed the entire spectrum of UN activities in peace, security, development and human rights – from prevention to post-conflict recovery and reconstruction. From this perspective, member states' obligations under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights now also formed a critical foundation for sustaining peace (UN 2018a).

Second, sustaining peace was now considered "the primary responsibility of national governments and authorities in identifying, driving and directing priorities, strategies and activities" (UN 2016, 2), with the international community relegated to a supportive role. Seen through this lens, sustaining peace is not an "intervention defined by the funding cycles of donors or mandates of peace operations; rather, it is an ongoing effort most effectively undertaken through national policies" (Mahmoud and Makoond 2018, 8).

This formulation of sustaining peace was able to gain broad support within the UN universe because it allowed different parties to interpret the concept in line with their preferences. The language around sustaining peace could suggest that an existing peace should be maintained over time, rather than to be still needing to be built by external actors (Caparini and Milante 2017). The emphasis on national ownership was welcomed by those who were wary of external intervention, while also reflecting the recognition that a sustainable peace must ultimately be upheld by national actors in the long run and that peace is a public good for which the state is responsible.

At the same time, sustaining peace could also be read in the tradition of a more activist international agenda, given its strong emphasis on prevention and its focus on addressing the root causes of conflicts through "peacebuilding". According to the 2016 resolutions, sustaining peace may include strengthening the rule of law, promoting sustainable economic growth, poverty eradication, social development, sustainable development and national reconciliation. It requires an inclusive political process, with sustaining peace understood as "both a goal and a process to build a common vision of a society, ensuring that the needs of *all segments of the population* are taken into account" (UN 2016, 2, emphasis added).

The concept of sustaining peace has thus been interpreted as aligning more closely with the idea of positive peace and Lederach's emphasis on local ownership. According to this interpretation, sustaining peace becomes an explicit and deliberate policy objective for all states, regardless of whether they are affected by violent conflict, and includes proactive measures aimed at building on peace where it already exists by reinforcing the structures, attitudes and institutions that underpin it (Mahmoud and Makoond 2018, 7). This highlights Lederach's notion of infrastructures for peace, which, from the UN perspective, represent both strong and inclusive national ownership and leadership, as defined in the resolutions, and the recognition that sustaining peace involves everyday peace (MacGinty 2021) and the capacity of individuals and groups to live together without resorting to violence to resolve conflicts or disputes. The main thrust of these arguments is reiterated in UN Secretary-General Guterres's *New Agenda for Peace*, unveiled in July 2023 (UN 2023), which again emphasises prevention and the UN's main role in supporting national infrastructures for peace.

Although both the Advisory Group of Experts, which had introduced the concept of sustaining peace, and the subsequent UN resolutions of the General Assembly refer to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with SDG 16 on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies mentioned as a manifestation of "sustaining peace" (UN 2015, para. 148), the documents still leave open the question of whether sustaining peace implies more than a process not bound by time. Since 2015, however, elements of environmental peacebuilding have begun to enter the UN policy discourse, particularly within UN Peacebuilding Affairs (UNU-CPR 2023), and several UN peacekeeping missions have also started incorporating the environmental footprint of their mandates, for example in MINUSCA, MINUSMA, and UNMISS (Bakaki and Böhmelt 2021).

3. Realising Sustainable Peacebuilding

Building on the conceptual debates outlined above, this chapter explores how sustainable peacebuilding is reflected in selected areas of action of African regional organisations and considers the lessons that can be drawn from both positive experiences and challenges in realising a more sustainable approach to peacebuilding.

We first address the challenges of conducting peacebuilding in violent settings and examine how aspects of sustainable peacebuilding are integrated into so-called robust peace operations led or mandated by the AU in the Lake Chad Basin and in Somalia. The second section focuses on the humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus and its implementation within both the AU and ECOWAS, exploring the resulting opportunities and challenges for sustainable peacebuilding. Third, we discuss the issue of local ownership, an essential element of sustainable peacebuilding, through the example of the former African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

3.1 Peace Support Operations and Sustainable Peacebuilding

The concept of *sustaining peace* recognises the changing dynamics of contemporary security challenges and the practical changes required to resolve conflicts and build sustainable peace. One such adjustment is the recognition that peacebuilding occurs along a continuum. While the traditional idea of building peace at the end of war remains logical, it is increasingly impractical to conceptualise peacebuilding as a strictly sequential set of interventions undertaken only once violence has ceased. Since the purpose of peacebuilding is to establish structures "that remove causes of wars and offer alternatives to war in situations where wars might occur" (Galtung 1976, 298), it is reasonable to expect that peacebuilding interventions will be undertaken after at least some consensus has been reached among warring factions, about the nature of the structures and the alternatives.

Galtung's and later Boutros-Ghali's (1992) visions of interventions assumed a world in which wars clearly began and ended, where armed actors had identifiable goals that could be negotiated to allow for a reimagining of coexistence. In such a world, armed conflict followed a linear trajectory – violence, followed by a ceasefire, then negotiations and peacebuilding. That world no longer provides an adequate template for conceptual thinking about peacebuilding.

Of course, long-term peacebuilding interventions cannot be undertaken in the midst of violence. Yet, the nature of contemporary conflicts necessitates that the foundations of peacebuilding – such as the provision of basic services, community engagement to facilitate multilevel support for political processes and efforts to strengthen social cohesion – be laid even during ongoing violence. Empirical evidence shows that appropriately sized peacekeeping presences can contribute to creating and sustaining peace by reducing battle violence and providing security guarantees (Hultman et al. 2014; Fortna 2004; Sambanis 2008). Lederach and Appleby (2020) argue that peacebuilding should be strategic, meaning "an approach to reducing violence, resolving conflict and building peace" (Lederach and Appelby 2020, 5) that draws on all the actors present in a given context to first reduce violence and then address the root causes of conflict.

The shift towards doing peace work in volatile situations does not in any way suggest replacing the sequential peacebuilding that occurs after armed violence. Rather, it is reflects recognition that peacebuilding increasingly takes place alongside peace support operations (PSOs) and is no longer limited to the post-war phase. Contemporary armed conflicts do not follow a neat chronological trajectory of war, ceasefire and peacebuilding. Instead, peacebuilding "amidst violence" has become an increasingly prevalent phenomenon (Öjendal et al. 2021).

Despite this conceptual and practical shift, peacebuilding in violent contexts has received limited attention from researchers (Öjendal et al. 2021; Hunt and Curran, 2020). Given the risks involved, the idea of undertaking peacebuilding in volatile situations may appear absurd. Yet the evolving nature and dynamics of contemporary conflicts, and the delays that often prevent the participation of peacebuilding actors in PSOs, have meant that peace support actors without the requisite peacebuilding competencies often step in to undertake basic peacebuilding interventions.

Using two case studies, the AMISOM and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) intervention in the Lake Chad Basin, this section explores peacebuilding in two volatile contexts. The cases were deliberately selected to show similarities in peacebuilding in volatile situations across two different contexts by two different types of actors. AMISOM, undertaken by the AU in partnership with the UN, was cast in the mould of traditional peacekeeping under a Chapter VII mandate, with troops contributed by countries other than Somalia. The MNJTF, by contrast, is a mission deployed by affected

member states deploying their own forces, on their own territory, with the right of hot pursuit across borders into neighbouring affected member states.

AMISOM represents a contemporary peace operation, whereas the MNJTF fits the mould of an outlier ad hoc security initiatives undertaken by affected member states. Two main observations run through both cases. First, whatever their designation, PSOs are critical enablers of peacebuilding. Second, they serve as placeholders until peacebuilding actors can deploy. Fully harnessing the opportunities presented by PSOs requires a more structured relationship between those engaged in PSOs and those working in peacebuilding.

Charting the Trajectory of Building Peace in Volatile Situations

It was Boutros Boutros-Ghali who, in his seminal *Agenda for Peace*, first articulated the linkage between peacekeeping and peacebuilding (Boutros-Ghali 1992). He suggested that one of the aims of the UN should be to use peacekeeping to assist in implementing peace agreements. Because traditional peacekeeping is deployed at the end of armed violence, when a peace agreement is already in place, UN peacebuilding efforts have typically occurred only once the environment was conducive for civilian deployments, usually after the signing of a ceasefire agreement. As a result, peacebuilding was, to a large extent, undertaken in relatively non-threatening environments.

However, as discussed in the preceding sections, the idea of peacebuilding has undergone several transformations – from its traditional framing as an intervention at war's end to a more contemporary framing that situates it on the broader stabilisation and peacemaking continuum. The first noticeable changes to the concept of peacebuilding are traceable to the late 1990s, when the UN deployed missions with executive mandates in East Timor and Kosovo. In these cases, the UN assumed the role of the state, putting in place interventions that established a monopoly over the use of force to enable longer-term peacebuilding and state-building (Knight 2003).

In August 2001, the UN Security Council addressed a comprehensive approach to peacebuilding by identifying three stages in which peacebuilding may occur: preventing the outbreak of war, preventing recurrence and preventing the continuation of armed conflict (UN Security Council 2001). This staging recognises that peacebuilding may be preventive, post-conflict or undertaken to halt armed violence. While calling for an

"unambiguous division of labour, based on the comparative advantage of different implementing bodies" (UN Security Council 2001, para. 5), the Security Council also acknowledged the need to ensure that, whether short or long term, it is important to ensure that no matter which part of the spectrum the action is undertaken, peacebuilding is conducted in ways that promote sustainability. Undertaking peace amid violence cannot address the structural causes of conflicts, as it focuses on removing immediate threats and providing interventions that ensure the survival of affected populations (Atack 2003/4, 24-25). Nevertheless, the way these interventions are carried out can influence the temporal dimension of peacebuilding and affect the sustainability of medium- to long-term efforts.

In practice, peacebuilding in volatile situations, where there is no cessation of hostilities, consent is constrained and armed violence persists, became more common from the mid-2000s. For the UN, whose constitutive and legal instruments constrain it from deploying into volatile situations, creative approaches were developed to allow it to fulfil its obligations to maintain international peace and security. One is partnership peacekeeping, an arrangement that enables the UN to work with regional organisations that have greater latitude to operate in non-benign environments and help de-escalate conflicts (UN Security Council, 2015). Another is through the so-called "Chapter VI and half" mandate, which give missions the authority to push beyond the traditional principles of consent, impartiality and the non-use of force except in self-defence (Tchie 2023). Such missions, endowed with robust mandates, may use force in self-defence, in defence of the mandate and in protecting civilians. These frameworks have enabled UN peace operations to undertake peacebuilding efforts in volatile situations.

Over the last two decades, the UN has deployed peace operations into situations of armed conflict with limited agreements – agreements involving only some parties to the conflict – or in collaboration with other actors such as the AU in Darfur (United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur, UNAMID) or alongside multiple actors, as in Mali (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, MINUSMA). The involvement of other actors in peacekeeping and PSOs, particularly in non-permissive environments, also means that peacebuilding interventions are increasingly undertaken by actors other than the UN (Karlsrud 2017). In these contexts, uniformed personnel are tasked with providing a safe and secure environment that reduces violence, facilitates the

political and diplomatic resolution of the conflict and undertakes interventions to guarantee the survival of the affected population.

The AU, for its part, is able to deploy into situations of active armed violence. Notably, despite this legislative permissiveness, AU deployments into volatile situations have still relied on consent. AU peace support operations (PSOs) have distinct characteristics (Tchie 2023; de Coning and Tchie 2023). First, they are comparatively smaller missions. Although AMISOM shows that they can evolve into larger multidimensional missions, their initial deployments are generally military-heavy because of the contexts in which they are deployed. Second, they are often sent into areas where there is no peace to keep. Consequently, military actors in AU PSOs frequently combine military, humanitarian and peacebuilding functions, at least in the early stages of deployment. While such practices are not ideal, the realities of contemporary insecurity necessitate pragmatism.

The key analytical question, therefore, is how to balance peacebuilding interventions within the broader context of addressing armed violence. The dynamics of doing peacebuilding in situations of violent conflict and insecurity create a fundamental dilemma at the intersection of the politics of intervention and the political requirements of sustainable peacebuilding. By default, the mandates of peace operations prioritise engagement at the state level, often at the expense of a people-centred approach. The statist orientation can create perceptions of bias towards the state and its actors, raising questions about the extent to which such support validates or legitimises governments that may have lost legitimacy among certain populations (Mahmoud et al. 2018). When such perceptions are allowed to form and develop, they can affect the procedural dimension of peacebuilding and ultimately undermine the durability of sustainable peace.

Peace Support Operations as Critical Enablers for Peacebuilding

According to de Coning (2020, 845):

> Peace operations are deployed to contain violent conflict, to provide security guarantees during periods when the local system is not resilient enough yet to do so on its own, and to nudge a peace process along by offering positive incentives and support to the people and institutions that can sustain peace. They do so by trying to influence the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of a society away from violent conflict and towards self-sustainable peace.

Clearly, the tasks of PSOs contribute to laying the foundations for peacebuilding in periods of volatility. Van der Lijn (2006) emphasises that many of the interventions undertaken by peacekeeping operations help create negative peace in affected societies. Thus, for peacekeeping efforts to support the creation of long-term, positive peace, these interventions must be embedded within a broader approach.

There is a symbiotic relationship between PSOs and peacebuilding. Without a permissive environment, peacebuilding actors cannot deploy, yet without the basic elements of peace, such as physical security and the provision of public goods essential for survival, PSOs cannot succeed. Sustaining the gains of PSOs in violent settings depends heavily on peacebuilding measures, including efforts to de-escalate violence, resolve conflicts, transform relationships and create frameworks for socioeconomic development (Darkwa 2023). Conversely, effective peacebuilding requires an enabling environment that guarantees a minimum level of security for peacebuilding actors and their investments (Last 2000).

The volatility of contemporary conflict contexts, including the deliberate targeting of peace support actors (Cruz 2017), presents distinctive challenges for PSOs generally, and for non-armed peace support actors in particular. Consequently, humanitarian, peacebuilding and development actors often tend to maintain a light footprint, particularly during the initial phases of mission deployment. To protect these civilian actors, their deployment into operational areas is often delayed; and once deployed, they tend to require security escorts and protection to carry out their mandated tasks.

In highly non-permissive environments in which peacebuilding efforts take place, mission assets are used to transport, accommodate, escort and protect humanitarian, development and peacebuilding personnel in hard-to-reach areas. Because PSOs generally have wider geographic coverage, they can also share information from remote areas with the wider peacebuilding community. Moreover, mission assets have played a crucial role in facilitating peacebuilding work. In Darfur and Somalia, for example, mission assets have been instrumental in providing escort services for humanitarian actors such as the World Food Programme, other UN humanitarian agencies, and civil and political affairs personnel (Mamiya and Hansen 2020; Fryer, 2013; African Union 2014). In Somalia, AMISOM also provided "lifesaving support to the needy population, especially in those areas where humanitarian actors are absent or have limited access. This support includes provision of potable water, basic healthcare services and basic social services" (African

Union 2013, para. 40). Similarly, In the Lake Chad Basin, medical actors working across the humanitarian, stabilisation and peacebuilding domains have been able to operate owing to the facilitation provided by the MNJTF (Onuoha et al 2023).

PSOs thus contribute significantly to the procedural dimension of sustainable peace through their essential role in creating a protective environment for effective peacebuilding.

Peace Support Operations as Placeholders for Peacebuilding

African-led PSOs are often deployed as first responders, with the expectation that they will eventually transition to a multidimensional UN operation, as happened in Burundi, the Central African Republic, Liberia, Mali and Sierra Leone. As noted above, African-led operations are heavily militarised, with limited civilian involvement in the field. Consequently, these missions lack the full range of capacities required for comprehensive peacebuilding. For instance, at the outset of its deployment in Somalia, AMISOM did not have a civilian component. As a result, interventions aimed at supporting the population, including the provision of "potable water, basic healthcare services and basic social services", were undertaken by the AMISOM troops themselves (African Union 2013 para. 40).

Designed primarily to address immediate basic needs, such interventions are often low-budget, short-term early interventions designed to address basic needs, and to win the hearts and minds of the local population. They are often framed as quick impact projects (QIPs) and peace strengthening projects (PSPs), designed to meet the immediate needs of the affected populations. As illustrated in the section on the localisation of peacebuilding frameworks below (see section 3.3), these interventions have helped address immediate needs such as shelter, food, potable water and healthcare, among many others. They thus serve as entry-points for longer-term peacebuilding and represent early demonstrations of a people-centred approach. These interventions provide not only survival mechanisms but also lay the foundation for transforming conflict dynamics.

Despite the utility of these interventions for peacebuilding, it is important to point out that AU PSOs do not have the requisite capacities to conduct peacebuilding. The nature of their mandates can be limiting, as AU missions often operate in support of the host government. This can restrict their ability to be inclusive, potentially leading to

perceptions of bias towards the government or ruling authority. Moreover, the contexts into which the AU deploys, which are typically volatile and insecure, mean that the primary objective is to create a safe and secure environment that enables the deployment of other actors. Consequently, AU missions are militarily heavy, at least in the initial stages.

Given its limited resources, AU efforts at building peace in volatile contexts are unable to address the structural dimensions of sustainable peacebuilding. The original assumption for AMISOM, for instance, was that the mission would operate for six months, creating an enabling security environment for a UN mission to take over. Nevertheless, as will be demonstrated subsequently, a number of innovations have emerged in peacebuilding in African-led PSOs.

Innovations for Peacebuilding from Peace Support Operations

Over the years, two main innovations have emerged, conceptually and in practice, in the peacebuilding domain. Conceptually, there has been a shift away from the classical notion of linear peacebuilding, which presented peacebuilding neatly at "war's end", towards an approach that accommodates the realities of non-linear conflicts and persistent insecurity (Paris 2004). Undertaking peacebuilding in violent contexts poses significant risks to investments made in interventions. Yet lessons learnt in certain contexts provide cautious guidance. First, in situations of asymmetric armed violence, armed groups often exploit the absence of state presence and the lack of service provision to fill the void. Thus, while unpredictable actions by aggressors (whether state or non-state actors) may place peacebuilding interventions at significant risk, the absence of peacebuilding efforts in such contexts poses an even greater danger. In Somalia, for example, Al-Shabaab exploited the lack of state presence and the scarcity of basic public goods to position itself as a viable alternative (Kluijver 2025; Keating and Waldman 2019). The correlative effect of peacebuilding and security amid violence has encouraged the design of interventions that (a) operate in contexts with tolerable levels of violence, and (b) leverage the presence of peace operations actors to guarantee the security of peacebuilding personnel.

Two main characteristics now define peacebuilding amid violence. The first is the emergence of a multipronged approach that combines peace operations, humanitarian action and long-term interventions. The second is the growing emphasis on integrated

missions guided by overarching strategic frameworks that facilitate priority setting and sequencing, thus enabling all interventions deployed in peace operations to be leveraged for peacebuilding.

The AU's experience in Somalia offers valuable insights into these two characteristics. Although AMISOM's initial deployment was purely military with an enemy-centric focus, it gradually evolved into a more population-centric and multidimensional mission. By 2015, the AU had developed two important documents for its QIPs/PSP projects – a policy, which was developed in 2013, and guidelines, developed in 2015. These documents provide direction grounded in both pragmatism and sustainability. In the Lake Chad Basin countries, the ongoing intervention of the MNJTF against Boko Haram followed a similar trajectory. What began as a military campaign in 2012 (Obamamoye 2017) expanded to include complementary humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts through the Regional Strategy for the Stabilisation, Recovery and Resilience of the Boko Haram Affected Areas (RSS).

Another observation is that the design of interventions has extended beyond the narrow concept of QIPs, which are typically humanitarian responses designed to build confidence in the mission. While traditional QIPs focused on the immediate needs of affected populations, the new approach co-creates interventions with affected populations to enhance their sustainability. This shift has also been accompanied by increased funding. The added value lies in situating interventions within broader frameworks and anchoring them in political strategies intended to outlast the PSOs. In the Lake Chad Basin, for example, the RSS provides avenues for undertaking peacebuilding alongside military operations, all within an overarching political strategy (see also Aniekwe and Brooks 2023). AMISOM, however, lacked the space and the resources to undertake effective peacebuilding. Despite its evolution and the increased attention to peacebuilding, AMISOM remained to a large extent focused on military interventions, with the UN assuming responsibility for the political aspect of resolving the conflict. Consequently, with limited funding and personnel, AMISOM's peacebuilding efforts remained largely limited to QIPs and PSPs, without a deliberate focus on the temporal dimension of peacebuilding.

By contrast, the Lake Chad Basin Commission's (LCBC) stabilisation approach bridges immediate community needs with longer-term peacebuilding priorities. It is driven by both the needs of affected populations and the political imperatives of key

actors. This dual approach lays the foundations for addressing the root causes of insecurity and strengthening the temporal dimension of sustainable peacebuilding.

A third innovation is a rethinking of the political dimension of peacebuilding. While concerns persist regarding the alignment of the political nature of peacebuilding with the ostensibly apolitical mandates of humanitarian and development actors, it is increasingly recognised that sustainable peacebuilding depends on the political support of relevant actors. The efforts in the Lake Chad Basin countries offer valuable pointers for accommodating the political imperatives of peacebuilding without necessarily enabling government instrumentalisation. The RSS provides a framework that facilitates collaboration between humanitarian, development and peace actors on the one hand, and formal and informal political actors on the other. This partnership model, which promotes joint planning, ensures that political actors participate in selecting, designing and implementing interventions. Such collaboration fosters political commitment to the success and sustainability of interventions because they align with broader political imperatives. For instance, the collaborative development of territorial action plans in Boko Haram-affected areas ensures that the activities are needs driven while also enjoying the political backing of the local governments responsible for resource allocation.

These examples demonstrate that despite the challenges associated with building peace in volatile contexts, efforts are being made to ensure that interventions adhere to the procedural, structural and temporal dimensions of sustainable peace. It is also notable that increasing attention is being paid to the environmental dimension of peacebuilding in Somalia and the Lake Chad Basin. This is to be expected given the central role of environmental factors in driving conflict. In Somalia, the unsustainable exploitation of trees for charcoal contributed to environmental degradation and sustained Al-Shabaab's war efforts. In the Lake Chad Basin, the shrinking of the lake and associated economic challenges intersected with the impact of MNJTF military activities on the livelihoods of the populations dependent on the lake.

In Somalia, the environmental focus aligns with the first strand of environmental peacebuilding discussed in the introduction: environmental degradation, conflict vulnerability, and the use of natural resources to finance and sustain violence. For instance, sanctions on the Somali charcoal trade, including directives for the Somali government and all member states to "take all the necessary measures to prevent the direct or indirect

import of charcoal from Somalia" (UN Security Council 2023), sought to cut off a major source of funding for Al-Shabaab's war efforts.

In the Lake Chad Basin, the situation differs. First, the shrinking of the lake, unrelated to the armed conflict, undermined livelihoods, making the promise of financial rewards by Boko Haram an appealing option for unemployed people, particularly the youth. Second, as part of efforts to curb Boko Haram's income streams, which included stealing fish from the civilian populations, some affected member states restricted economic activities such as fishing on the lake, exacerbating the loss of livelihoods and creating economic and food insecurity (Okeke-Ogbuafor et al. 2023). Accordingly, environmental peacebuilding efforts in the Lake Chad Basin focus on both strands: mitigating the conflict-related environmental impacts of the MNJTF, and pursuing socioeconomic recovery and environmental sustainability as opportunities for peace (African Union and Lake Chad Basin Commission 2018).

Summary

Clearly, peacebuilding in volatile situations is undertaken mainly in African-led PSOs. The normative guidelines provided for undertaking QIPs and PSPs indicate an appreciation of the critical role such interventions play in the long-term peacebuilding expected after violent conflict. In the case of the Lake Chad Basin, for instance, a comprehensive framework was established to guide peacebuilding efforts. Although the African institutions in both cases were resource constrained, the collaborative process used in framing and designing the RSS from the outset made it possible to have a clear resource mobilisation strategy at the very beginning of the engagement.

Since military interventions are not designed for peacebuilding, particularly the resource deficits associated with peacebuilding in volatile situations, they are certainly not ideal vehicles for this work. However, the realities of contemporary insecurity require pragmatic responses. Juxtaposing the interventions in Somalia against those in the Lake Chad Basin areas, it is evident that the AU-mandated intervention in Somalia was unable to address the structural dimension of the conflict. By contrast, the PSO mandated by the ad hoc coalition of member states and authorised by the AU addressed the temporal, procedural and ecological dimensions of peacebuilding, yet it still fell short of addressing

the structural dimensions. In both cases, very little attention was paid to the ecological effects of the PSOs; that is, the effects of the interventions on the environment.

Without a doubt, the conceptual and practical approaches to peacebuilding in situations of armed violence need to be recalibrated and implemented differently from peacebuilding at the end of war (Paris 2004). There is a need to reconsider the fundamental assumptions underpinning the conceptual framing of peacebuilding and its practical application. Although there is growing recognition that the dynamics of contemporary insecurity necessitate a reconceptualisation of peacebuilding, this acknowledgement is yet to translate into practice. Interventions remain compartmentalised into siloed phases – QIPs, post-conflict reconstruction, peacebuilding, development and others. While this neat compartmentalisation may be helpful for administrative purposes, it is unhelpful for addressing the challenges that peacebuilding seeks to address and undermines sustainability.

3.2 Towards a Nexus Approach for Peacebuilding Sustainability

Contemporary African conflicts do not unfold in a linear progression from pre-conflict to conflict and then post-conflict stages. Regional frameworks on post-conflict interventions signal that continental policymakers recognise that addressing complex conflict drivers requires comprehensive approaches. The AU and ECOWAS rhetoric of multidimensionality signals growing inclination towards a "nexus approach". Humanitarian and development agencies propelled this approach to international prominence in the 1990s when they joined forces to link emergency responses with development aid.

More recently, a peace component has been added to this nexus in recognition of the fact that international interventions often take place in conflict-affected situations. This addition resulted in the humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus, also known as the triple nexus approach. The HDP nexus acts as a framework to facilitate multipronged interventions that address local needs before, during and after conflicts. Consequently, humanitarian and development actors have had to apply conflict-sensitive lenses to ensure that interventions do not inadvertently exacerbate structural conflict drivers.

An effective nexus approach requires integrative frameworks that align the mandate, financial structures and working methods of regional actors so that they can

jointly implement each of the three pillars of the nexus (Fanning and Fullwood-Thomas 2019, 5).

The Institutional Framework

The AU's original Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development (PCRD) Policy, adopted in 2006, outlined certain key indicative elements (African Union 2006, 9), including security, humanitarian/emergency assistance, socioeconomic reconstruction and development, which, in principle, allude to the triple-nexus approach. Over the last decade, AU policy practice has gradually evolved to incorporate elements of the HDP nexus into its human security frameworks. For instance, the AU's Humanitarian Policy Framework (African Union 2015, 16) highlights the link between humanitarian action and post-conflict reconstruction.

A critical step in officially including the HDP nexus in AU's peacebuilding frameworks was the AU's Tangier Conference on Promoting the Peace, Security and Development Nexus, held in October 2022. The Tangier Declaration called for "a paradigm shift to development-oriented and innovative approaches to ensure the nexus between peace, security, humanitarian, and developmental programmes" (African Union 2022).

The AU's PCRD Policy, further updated in 2024, explicitly mentions the HDP nexus several times, reflecting the policy debates surrounding the AU's peacebuilding approach in the years preceding the framework's adoption. The PCRD policy acknowledges the importance of sequencing the dimensions of a nexus approach, for example the humanitarian pillar addresses immediate needs while the development pillar is implemented over the long term (African Union 2024, 4). Additionally, the policy signals that the HDP nexus approach is anchored in partnerships among actors across the different sectors (African Union 2024, 23), indicating an appreciation of the complex synergies among actors working at different stages of the peace continuum.

Notably, the PCRD Policy identifies climate insecurity as an emerging threat that requires a triple-nexus approach (African Union 2024, 50). Climate change impacts, including disaster-driven displacement, livelihood degradation and food insecurity, act as threat multipliers that exacerbate existing tensions and conflicts. The AU's recognition of the need to address the environmental challenges associated with climate change

potentially signals growing interest in developing regional environmental peacebuilding approaches.

By contrast, the HDP nexus has not featured prominently in ECOWAS peacebuilding frameworks. Neither the Plan of Action for the 15 Components of the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) nor Vision 2050 specifically mention the triple nexus. However, both strategic frameworks contain guidelines that align with the nexus approach. The ECPF Plan of Action notes that the role of humanitarian assistance is to link short-term relief and emergency assistance with medium-term rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts in post-conflict settings (ECOWAS 2019, 147). Additionally, Pillar 1 of the ECOWAS Vision 2050 on Peace, Security and Stability incorporates improving regional peacebuilding mechanisms, strengthening post-conflict stabilisation and providing humanitarian assistance (ECOWAS 2022, 52). The vision also includes Pillar 4 on Transformation, Inclusive and Sustainable Development, although it is not explicitly linked to the peace and security themes.

Integrating the Development Pillar

In practice, the AU and ECOWAS nexus approach differs slightly from the HDP model, focusing instead on the peace, security and development pillars in peacebuilding processes. Interviews with officials in both the AU and ECOWAS[4] revealed enthusiasm for integrating the development pillar, particularly because contemporary peacebuilding is often implemented without comprehensive peace agreements in place, as outlined in the previous section.

An ECOWAS interviewee pointed out that regional peacebuilding in such complex contexts must combine elements of conflict prevention, peacemaking and post-conflict reconstruction. Promoting economic development may help prevent the spread of conflict, consolidate peace in areas where armed violence has subsided and place such areas on a path to achieving economic growth. The African Solidarity Initiative (ASI), launched in 2012 to create a pan-African platform, could facilitate integration of the development pillar. Originally envisioned to provide financial support to post-conflict

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[4] AU PCRD Centre, 19 January 2024; AU Commission, Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department, 22 January 2024; ECOWAS Commission, ECOWAS Fund for Regional Stabilization and Development, 23 January 2024; ECOWAS Commission, Political Affairs, Peace & Security, 25 January 2024.

countries, conceptualised by the AU at the time as being in a post peace agreement phase (African Union 2012, 2), the ASI has never been provided with operational structures such as a secretariat or steering committee (Obamamoye 2020). Moreover, the AU has since been revised its understanding of peacebuilding contexts to recognise the difficulties in negotiating comprehensive peace agreements as the entry point for peacebuilding.

ECOWAS, on the other hand, has made significant progress in concurrently implementing peacebuilding and economic development initiatives. The Fund for Regional Stabilization and Development (FRSD), established by the ECOWAS Commission and Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), promotes economic development, agriculture, employment and food security in post-crisis settings. The Fund has supported projects in The Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Togo and Benin. Its pilot project in The Gambia ran from 2019 to December 2023, focusing on skills development and income generation in agricultural sectors, while its second-phase projects in Guinea-Bissau (2021–2025) focused on promoting employability, climate-smart agriculture and social cohesion.

The AU and ECOWAS emerging approach to integrating the development pillar in peacebuilding contexts echoes China's "developmental peace" approach, which prioritises economic development and strengthening state structures without promoting a liberal state-building model. However, Wong (2021, 536) points out that the developmental peace approach may not lead to sustainable outcomes because conflict drivers extend beyond economic underdevelopment. Moreover, state-led economic development in areas unaffected by armed violence, such as large urban centres, risks reinforcing economic inequality and subsequently fuelling conflict. The AU and ECOWAS personnel interviewed in this study did not mention the political implications of the ways their respective organisations integrate the development pillar in their peacebuilding approach. According to Curtis and Dzinesa (2012, 17), given that peacebuilding is a politically contested process, the AU's and ECOWAS's apparent lack of safeguards against the risks of uneven economic development is concerning.

Complex internal administrative processes and a chronic lack of joint planning impede the AU and ECOWAS from effectively incorporating socioeconomic development in peacebuilding. At ECOWAS, the peacebuilding mandate falls under the Political Affairs, Peace & Security Department, while development projects are handled by the Department of Economic Affairs & Agriculture or the Infrastructure, Energy &

Digitalization. One ECOWAS respondent described collaboration as ranging from formal to organic due to the lack of mechanisms for aligning initiative design. These challenges are even more pronounced in collaboration between the AU Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD) and the AU Commission. Although the AUDA-NEPAD's 2022 Annual Report highlights the agency's involvement in projects in peacebuilding settings such as South Sudan and Somalia, neither the report nor the AUDA-NEPAD Strategic Framework (2020–2023) explicitly links these activities to peacebuilding or post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

On a more optimistic note, the AU's revised PCRD policy provides a pathway for the continental body to integrate environmental peacebuilding principles. The revised policy (African Union 2024, 10) recognises that climate and environmental security should be pillars of the AU's nexus approach to peacebuilding. As previously discussed, environmental peacebuilding encompasses a wide range of issues. The AU's decision to incorporate environmental issues into the developmental pillar aligns with what Dresse et al. (2019, 110) describe as the third trajectory of environmental peacebuilding. The continental body would thus promote sufficient regulatory capacity in post conflict states to ensure that development initiatives promote inclusive resource distribution.

Environmental peacebuilding may also act as an entry point for ECOWAS to climate security initiatives. Although the ECPF does not mention climate change or climate insecurity, it does contain provisions to guide regional natural resource governance. Additionally, ECOWAS adopted its regional climate strategy (RCS) and Action Plan in 2022, focusing on agriculture, livestock, aquaculture, water resources, natural ecosystems and biodiversity. ECOWAS's environmental peacebuilding efforts are therefore likely to mirror the AU's focus on the socioeconomic impacts of climate insecurity.

Integrating the Humanitarian Pillar

The AU and ECOWAS approach to integrating humanitarian initiatives into peacebuilding are largely embedded within the mandate of regional PSOs. ECOWAS's peacebuilding efforts have centred on peacekeeping missions such as the ECOWAS Stabilization Mission in Guinea Bissau (ECOMIB). As a result, its humanitarian initiatives in peacebuilding are primarily implemented through QIPs, including health outreach and water and sanitation projects, used as political instruments to win local support. As discussed in the previous

section, the AU has taken a similar approach in both the AU Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) and the AU Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS). The AU has provided basic infrastructure and goods, including classrooms, police stations, food rations and sports equipment, to both liberated and internally displaced communities. As noted earlier, while QIPS address immediate needs, they can also create entry points for longer-term peacebuilding efforts.

The implementation of humanitarian efforts within military deployments is evolving with the operationalisation of the African Standby Force (ASF). To date, the two ASF deployments – in Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo – have followed the traditional model of protecting humanitarian corridors. For example, the mandate of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) Mission to Mozambique (SAMIM) included supporting humanitarian assistance and reconstruction efforts. The ECPF Plan of Action's Logical Framework goes further than merely opening humanitarian routes; it includes provisions for developing a standard operating procedure to integrate a humanitarian aid delivery system into the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF).

The high cost of humanitarian initiatives means that the regional actors must rely heavily on partnerships with humanitarian agencies. QIPs, in particular, are resource-intensive, making donor support critical for implementing these projects, often leading to a piecemeal approach. The AU's establishment of the African Humanitarian Agency (AfHA) in 2023 is a significant step towards creating more systematic alignment between the humanitarian and peace pillars within the AU. The AfHA was established in line with the outcomes of the 2022 Malabo Extraordinary Summit on Humanitarian Action. Additionally, the Africa Humanitarian Organisations Network (AHON) was launched on the sidelines of the same summit.

According to an AU respondent, systematic integration of the humanitarian pillar into peacebuilding is in the nascent stages, as both the AfHA and AU PCRD Centre are still not fully operational.

Summary

In conclusion, the AU and ECOWAS are gradually developing policy practices that can provide entry points for the establishment of an integrative framework that facilitates

systematic cross-sectoral collaboration. For such a nexus framework to be effective, it must address the contradictions that exist between the three pillars.

The first contradiction between the pillars concerns the explicitly political nature of peacebuilding efforts, in contrast to the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. These principles have historically offered a level of protection to humanitarian actors, allowing them to render aid across different sides of the conflicts. However, in contemporary conflicts, particularly violent insurgencies, these protections have been eroded as combatants increasingly use access to humanitarian aid as a bargaining chip (Pedersen 2021, 260).

The second contradiction relates to the risks of scaling up economic development in fragile settings. Implementing development projects in more stable areas can exacerbate grievances and entrench economic inequality between the areas under state control and those controlled by non-state actors. Moreover, fragile contexts often have weak or ineffective regulatory frameworks, creating conditions for harmful business practices such as labour exploitation, corruption and environmental harm. Zondi (2017, 127) argues that AU peacebuilding efforts should focus on transforming the continent's economic infrastructures. The AU and ECOWAS must therefore guard against poorly designed development pillar projects.

Finally, regional actors must confront practical challenges, including financial constraints, reliance on external partnerships and the slow operationalisation of newly established structures.

3.3 Localisation of Peacebuilding Frameworks

The African continent has long been marked by a complex tapestry of conflicts and fragility, ranging from interstate wars to internal strife, ethnic tensions and socio-political upheavals. The persistent nature of these challenges calls for a reimagining of liberal peacebuilding approaches. This section explores the imperative of localising peacebuilding in Africa, recognising that effective peacebuilding cannot follow a one-size-fits-all approach. By exploring the multifaceted dimensions of peacebuilding and drawing on insights from the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), this section highlights the role of contextually grounded strategies in shaping a more stable and harmonious future for the continent. AMISOM was the AU's longest, largest, most expensive and most deadly operation (see Textbox 1 below). Its experiences shed light on

both the challenges and triumphs of localised regional peacebuilding efforts, demonstrating the potential and limitations of externally led interventions. Although stability has been restored in certain parts of Somalia, many communities still endure persistent instability and violence, a situation largely attributed to the lack of involvement of local individuals in the design and implementation of peacebuilding and peace enforcement endeavours.

Textbox 1: The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM)

As early as 1991–92, the Siad Barre regime had collapsed in Somalia, leaving the country practically ungovernable amid the widespread influence of warlords who had turned the country into a haven for terrorists and religious extremist groups. Numerous warlords and armed Islamist groups, including the Islamic Courts (1994), Harakat al-Shabaab (2005) and Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS, 2007), among others, jostled for control of the major cities and population centres. During this period, Somalia was not only ravaged by intense violent conflict but devastated by famine and largely ignored by the international community.

After several failed UN and US-led missions, the United Nations Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS) was instrumental in advancing the Djibouti Peace Process in 2001, which led to creation of the Transitional National Government (TNG) in 2004. Due to the insecurity in the country, the TNG was based in Kenya and could not relocate to Mogadishu, as it lacked legitimacy and depended heavily on external assistance.

In response to a request from the new TNG president, the AU and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) considered deploying a peacebuilding mission to support his regime in establishing itself inside Somalia. Another significant development came in June 2006, when the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) ousted the warlords who had previously run Mogadishu and much of south-central Somalia. ICU rule in Mogadishu and other regions briefly restored a measure of order and stability, but its links to Al-Qaida and Al-Shabaab evoked serious concerns in Washington, DC, and Addis Ababa. This justified an Ethiopian military intervention in Somalia. After months of urban combat, the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) expelled the ICU from Mogadishu.

By January 2007, AMISOM was authorised by the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) and later endorsed by the UN Security Council in February 2007. These authorisations provided cover for Ethiopia's troops to withdraw from Somalia. The decision to establish AMISOM was thus taken in light of the failures of previous missions and the inability of

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the sub-regional IGAD intervention strategy to deploy the IGAD Peace Support Mission to Somalia (IGASOM). The mission initially aimed to protect Somalia's fledgling TNG and provide an exit strategy for the embattled Ethiopian forces.

In December 2021, the UN Security Council approved a plan for the transition from AMISOM to a UN peacekeeping mission, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM). On 31 December 2021, AMISOM officially handed over its responsibilities to ATMIS (AU) and UNSOM (UN), an event that marked the end of its mandate. ATMIS and UNSOM were tasked with supporting political and peacebuilding efforts, with a reduced emphasis on military operations. In November 2024, UNSOM was closed and succeeded by a new political mission, the UN Transitional Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNTMIS).

The transition from AMISOM to ATMIS (for the AU) in 2022 represented a significant shift in the international community's approach to supporting peace and stability in Somalia, focusing more on political and governance priorities as the security landscape continued to evolve. The situation in Somalia remains complex, and efforts towards achieving lasting stability and peace are ongoing.

Sources: Williams 2018; Wondemagegnehu and Kebede 2017).

Local Ownership in Peacebuilding

The concept of "local ownership" is extremely vague, much like the term "sustainable peacebuilding". This ambiguity allows for multiple interpretations, both in terms of its philosophical and operational dimensions. According to Lederach (1995) and Chesterman (2007), local ownership represents the ultimate goal or outcome of sustainable peacebuilding. The notion of local ownership gained prominence in development discourse in the mid-1990s, with an emphasis on solutions that are generated by local communities to overcome obstacles to development.

Local ownership refers to the capacity of stakeholders to autonomously develop, implement, and sustain peacebuilding interventions and projects. It entails the active involvement, consultation and commitment of community institutions, civil society organisations and individuals in pursuing objectives and making decisions, while minimising the impact of external actors on peacebuilding processes. Achieving local ownership therefore requires a collaborative process that includes the involvement of all stakeholders (Hellmüller 2014; Donais 2015). Lederach's peacebuilding pyramid

emphasises the importance of including all levels of society in peacebuilding efforts, including high-ranking officials, intermediaries and grassroots communities. Lederach (1995) identifies three essential conditions for achieving local ownership: *indigenous empowerment, cultural sensitivity and long-term commitment*. As outlined in the first part of this paper, the rationale for promoting local ownership lies in the recognition that conflicts originate inside societies and therefore the development and implementation of peacebuilding efforts must take place within the affected society.

The concept of local ownership in peacebuilding originated mainly as a response to the dominant influence exercised by donors and other external actors over local agendas and peace processes. This tendency has been criticised for being a form of peacebuilding imperialism. The participation of external actors in deciding the pace, structure and framework of peacebuilding invariably excludes local populations, resulting in impractical, ineffective and unsustainable long-term solutions.

An essential aspect of local ownership therefore involves not just mandating local participation in the design and implementation of peacebuilding initiatives but also transferring meaningful control over financial resources and institutions. Evidence from externally financed peacebuilding programmes shows that they often retain strong authority over the peacebuilding initiatives, allowing little space for local autonomy in decision-making.

Realising Local Ownership in the AMISOM Context

Within the framework of AMISOM, donors such as the European Union, the United States and the United Kingdom exerted significant control over the funding and logistical networks for equipment and support services, often struggling to fully relinquishing authority over project agendas. This is mainly due to insufficient openness and accountability from the AU, AMISOM, the Somali Federal Government (SFG) and the Somali Ministry of Finance (SMS) in managing the funds provided by donors.

As already outlined in the previous sections, AMISOM is a classic example of a mission deployed amidst ongoing violence, where there was no peace to keep. The mission therefore conducted peace enforcement operations alongside sustained peacebuilding endeavours. Sustainable peacebuilding in such contexts requires addressing immediate security problems while simultaneously striving for long-term

stability, reconciliation and development. AMISOM implemented localised peacebuilding projects in Somalia to engage with local people, build trust and tackle the root causes of violence. These efforts included community dialogue forums, support for local governance structures and collaboration with local civil society organisations. AMISOM aimed to empower communities, address grievances and foster reconciliation at the local level. Additionally, it contributed to enhancing the capabilities of Somali security forces and institutions, facilitating the transfer of security duties to the Somali government. Emphasising local capacity-building is crucial for sustained peace, as it allows local actors to assume responsibility for the peace process and ensures that peace initiatives are integrated at the community level.

Lederach's sustainable peacebuilding paradigm highlights the significance of local ownership, capacity-building and transformation in conflict-ridden countries. Applying this paradigm to AMISOM's peacekeeping endeavours in Somalia reveals several crucial links:

1. AMISOM's peacebuilding initiatives focus on involving local people and equipping them to assume responsibility for the peace process. This is consistent with Lederach's focus on the importance of local engagement and involvement in influencing peace and reconciliation processes. AMISOM has prioritised the inclusion of local voices and perspectives in peacebuilding efforts, recognising the significance of community support for lasting peace.
2. Lederach's concept highlights the importance of enhancing the skills and abilities of local individuals and organisations. AMISOM has assisted in enhancing the skills and capacities of Somali security forces, government institutions and civil society organisations. This empowerment of local actors has supported the long-term success of peacebuilding initiatives by facilitating the transfer of duties to local institutions.
3. Lederach emphasises the importance of tackling the underlying causes of conflict and fostering societal reform. AMISOM has used localised peacebuilding strategies focusing on reconciliation and dialogue, as well as addressing community grievances. It has aimed to promote lasting peace in Somalia by enabling transformative initiatives at the local level.

AMISOM, as a peace enforcement initiative, was also responsible for fulfilling numerous directives and policy standards set by the AU. Although Somalia is an AU member and requested AU assistance, it harboured reservations about fully trusting the deployed AMISOM forces owing to past experiences with some troop-contributing countries (TCCs).

Local populations, the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), and the presence of Kenya and Ethiopia as TCCs in Somalia often harboured mutual hostility and distrust.

AMISOM, in collaboration with UNSOM, has successfully established and reconstructed local governance institutions, including local institutions in the Federal Member States, which are now operational. The effectiveness of these institutions depends on the surrounding circumstances and, as stated by a representative of the FGS: "While we recognise the role of AMISOM in establishing governance structures in Somalia, we believe that local actors should be responsible for police duties and that ATMIS police should not be involved in policing activities in Somalia." Hence, it is clear that the establishment of external peacebuilding institutions can prolong inequalities, disturb power dynamics, and ultimately fail to effectively address the fundamental structural factors that give rise to conflict, which are specific to the local environment.

Summary

AMISOM's experience reinforces the argument that regional organisations such as the AU can play an essential role in sustainable peacebuilding. However, a military-heavy mission alone is not a panacea for sustainability and for effectively localising peacebuilding activities. There is a dire need to develop and operationalise multidimensional PSOs that combine political, military, humanitarian and civilian components. In other words, military strategies are most effective when coordinated with institution- and state-building processes, as well as police and civilian interventions.

Missions such as AMISOM require thorough planning and robust support capabilities, ideally to be formulated at the African Union Headquarters in Addis Ababa. Planning should be guided by explicit political objectives encompassing all AU entities, rather than being limited to the Conflict Management Directorate or only its Peace Support Operations Division. It is important to involve other support agencies, such as finance, human resources, legal, and the Conflict Prevention Directorate. The AU should contemplate institutionalising Conflict Management Task Forces to offer strategic headquarters assistance to PSOs. Furthermore, establishing an AU Commission-wide task force for each PSO would guarantee the allocation of necessary resources.

A central objective of AMISOM was to establish a safe environment for the host nation to carry out state-building initiatives, including expanding state authority. This was

anticipated based on various factors, including the existence of a functional and competent Somali National Security Forces (SNSF) that would assume responsibilities once AMISOM withdrew. This required a strong and effective collaboration between AMISOM and the host nation. The AU should prioritise measures to empower future mission headquarters to strengthen working relationships with host nations.

The experience in Somalia underscores that genuine localisation requires transferring not only security responsibilities but also decision-making authority to local actors, ensuring that peacebuilding processes are driven by Somali priorities and contexts rather than external agendas. Furthermore, AMISOM's trajectory highlights the importance of investing in local capacity-building from the outset of a mission, rather than treating it as an afterthought, to create sustainable pathways for community-led conflict resolution and governance structures that can endure beyond international intervention.

4. Conclusion and Outlook

This working paper began by outlining the broad and contested nature of the concept of sustainability in relation to peace and peacebuilding, encompassing at least four dimensions: temporal, structural, ecological and processual. We also explored how specific understandings of the concept of sustainable peacebuilding entered UN policy debates, illustrating the concept's multiple interpretations in both academic and practical contexts. While African regional organisations like the AU and ECOWAS have at least partially incorporated discussion on sustainable peacebuilding in their policy documents, we set out to explore how the concept is applied in practice. Evidence from African policy debates and the operations of African peace missions confirms our initial observation: the meaning of sustainable peacebuilding and how it should be practised remains ambiguous and only partially addressed in African regional peacebuilding practices.

If sustainable peacebuilding is reduced to its temporal dimension, that is, as something that endures over time, then nearly all peace-related activities undertaken by African regional organisations might be perceived as seeking to build sustainable peace. This is because peacebuilding has become a broad concept covering conflict prevention, peacekeeping, peacemaking, and post-conflict reconstruction and development. The trend towards more multidimensional African peace operations has led missions to integrate police-related and other civilian tasks that were initially defined as specific to peacebuilding. The prolonged and contested nature of African peace operations has also required missions to take questions of local ownership more seriously, as the success of such operations often depends on their ability to interact with local communities affected by conflict and missions' peace operations.

The structural dimension of sustainable peacebuilding, however, has been far more limited and we still lack a comprehensive understanding of how it is being addressed across different missions and practices. Addressing the root causes of conflicts remains difficult, particularly in the midst of violence. While delivering projects and interacting with local communities can mitigate the harm done during violent episodes, more comprehensive political strategies will be needed to deal with underlying conflict drivers. In active conflict settings, where open violence could be ended, better synchronisation of developmental and political approaches within regional organisations could be a useful strategy, but economic growth alone will not suffice as a sustainable peacebuilding

strategy. Understanding how African regional organisations can implement peacebuilding as a political project remains a task for further research, including engagement with UN Secretary-General Guterres's renewed focus on infrastructures for peace in the *New Agenda for Peace* (UN 2023).

The ecological dimension of sustainable peacebuilding has received even less attention. Given the importance of environmental factors as conflict drivers in Africa (Henrico and Doboš 2024; for an overview, see Mach et al. 2019), it is critical that this aspect be more fully integrated into African regional organisations' peace operations and related practices. Regarding the processual dimension, empirical findings from this working paper underline that scarce financial resources and donor dependency hinder the design of peace strategies aimed at building long-term relationships rather than delivering short-term project results. Sustainability, in the processual sense, is not merely a question of resources, it is fundamentally about relationships. Our empirical explorations reveal an enduring need for African regional peacebuilding to engage local communities beyond "projects" and humanitarian interventions, making them active participants in, and owners of, regional peacebuilding efforts.

Finally, our exploration of the conceptual and theoretical debates on sustainable peace and peacebuilding revealed that – in both academia and policy circles – they remain dominated by Western institutions and ideas. This dominance is mirrored in the limited efforts by African regional institutions to define their own approaches and understandings of what building sustainable peace entails. If sustainability is understood as a holistic, long-term normative project, then it is important to consider whose experiences and epistemologies shape the way we think about it. As a consequence, a narrowly framed and constrained debate offers limited potential for achieving genuine sustainability. Future research could build on existing explorations of the links between decolonial approaches and African epistemologies (Murithi 2006; Zondi 2017; Chanda et al. 2025) to explore their normative and practical contributions, fostering a more inclusive understanding of sustainable regional peacebuilding.

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