Book review

The Elgar Companion to War, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Africa

Edited by Geoff Harris

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The Elgar Companion to War, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Africa, edited by Geoff Harris provides an expansive and nuanced exploration of the multifaceted issues surrounding conflict and peacebuilding across the African continent. Structured into three parts, the book offers an analysis of the dynamics of conflict and the innovative solutions available for fostering peace. Part I focuses on the nature and scope of armed conflict in the twenty-first century, highlighting the evolving forms of violence and their impact on African societies. Part II explores the root causes of conflict, such as poor governance, economic disparities, and ethnic and religious divisions. Part III introduces 10 forward-thinking approaches to peacebuilding, including traditional African practices, dialogue-based solutions, trauma healing, and non-violent security alternatives. This work, enriched by contributions from leading experts, serves as an essential guide for policymakers, academics, and practitioners striving to understand and mitigate the complex drivers of conflict while working towards sustainable peace in Africa.

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Part I of the book focuses on the nature and scope of conflict and violence in Africa, with the first chapter, by Geoff Harris, offering an insightful analysis of different types of organised violence in the region. Harris categorises armed conflicts into three types: state-based conflicts, non-state conflicts, and one-sided violence against civilians. He provides a detailed account of the evolution of conflicts, pointing out the rise of violence associated with Islamic extremism and the increasing civilian casualties in recent years.

By using comprehensive data, Harris highlights the shifting landscape of conflict in Africa, especially between 2012 and 2021, when there was a marked deterioration in security. The chapter also contrasts deaths from organised violence with those caused by interpersonal and structural violence, emphasising that the latter are far more deadly but often overlooked because of a lack of media attention. A key takeaway is the enormous economic and social costs of war, which Harris argues have far-reaching consequences, not only for countries directly involved in the conflict but also for neighbouring nations.

Part II, on the other hand, explores the underlying causes of conflict and violence across Africa, beginning with an exploration of bad governance, political competition, and economic inequality. Kabale Ignatius Mukunto emphasises that poor governance, including corruption and ineffective administration, erodes trust in political elites and hinders development. This creates conditions where political competition often becomes a violent struggle for resources rather than a contest of ideas. Mukunto also explores how economic inequality, both vertical (between individuals) and horizontal (between groups), contributes to violence. Horizontal inequalities, such as unequal access to political power or economic benefits across ethnic or religious groups, often fuel group-based grievances, leading to inter-group conflict. In the second chapter of Part II, Olubunmi Damilola Akande examines horizontal inequalities, ethnicity, and religion as drivers of inter-group violence. Akande challenges simplistic views of African conflicts as primarily ethnic or religious, instead presenting a nuanced analysis that links grievances over economic and political inequality with identity-based conflicts. By examining case studies such as the conflicts in the Central African Republic and South Sudan, Akande demonstrates how elites manipulate ethnic and religious identities to mobilise groups for violent confrontations. The combination of historical factors like colonial boundaries and post-independence governance failures exacerbates divisions and perpetuates violence.

One takeaway from this part of the book is that identity-based conflicts are complex and often deeply intertwined with political and economic inequalities rather than purely ethnic or religious differences.

Part III is the longest section, with ten chapters. It begins with an analysis of traditional African conflict resolution methods. Jean Chrysostome K. Kiyala's chapter explores the effectiveness of Indigenous systems such as *Ubuntu* (African humanism), *Ujamaa* (African socialism), and the *palaver* (dialogue) system in post-conflict reconciliation and healing. He argues that while these mechanisms were historically successful, modern conflicts' scale and the erosion of social values pose challenges to their application today. Kiyala presents examples like Rwanda's *Gacaca* courts and Sierra Leone's *Fambul Tok* as successful models of adapting these traditions. In the subsequent chapter, Theodore Mbazumutima focuses on the *Bushingantahe* institution in Burundi, which played a pivotal role in resolving local disputes and fostering peace after the country's civil war. Mbazumutima highlights how the virtues of *Bushingantahe* – such as equity, justice, and community participation – have helped reconcile divided communities. Despite their effectiveness, both Kiyala and Mbazumutima acknowledge that these indigenous approaches must be adapted to contemporary challenges to remain relevant. Together, these two chapters emphasise the potential of blending traditional methods with modern peacebuilding practices to create sustainable solutions for Africa's complex conflicts.

The next chapter by Crispin Hemson underscores the transformative potential of education in conflict-ridden African contexts, where both students and educators are encouraged to rethink their roles in society to foster peace and justice. Hemson draws on his 50 years of experience to highlight how education can address structural violence and inequality. Moses Monday John, in the subsequent chapter, focuses on the training of civil society in non-violent action, particularly within the framework of sustainable peacebuilding in South Sudan. He critiques liberal peacebuilding models, which often rely on top-down approaches and advocates for grassroots training in non-violent resistance as a more effective and context-sensitive solution. John's chapter reinforces the importance of civil society's active participation in peace efforts and the philosophical grounding of non-violence in African epistemology, particularly through the concept of Ubuntu.

The next chapter by Diana Benoit highlights the crucial role of trauma healing in post-conflict societies, arguing that without addressing the deep psychological scars left by violence, attempts at reconciliation through truth commissions may falter. Benoit stresses that trauma healing requires long-term, community-driven efforts that extend beyond formal justice processes to prevent the re-emergence of violence. David Häfner and Joseph Farha's chapter, conversely, shifts the focus to the role of firearms in post-conflict societies, critiquing traditional disarmament approaches that prioritise the removal of weapons without addressing the underlying causes of civilian firearm ownership. They propose a Civilian Arms Management (CAM) model that prioritises managing firearms rather than their outright removal, particularly in post-conflict regions where disarmament efforts have often exacerbated insecurity.

Geoff Harris continues with a chapter that explores the potential of unconditional cash transfers as a peacebuilding tool. He examines pilot projects in Namibia, Kenya, and Uganda, arguing that a Basic Income Grant (BIG) can alleviate economic pressures that often lead to violence, especially among unemployed youth. By reducing poverty, improving psychological well-being, and fostering local economic growth, a BIG can contribute to lowering interpersonal and group violence. The chapter acknowledges, however, that scaling such programmes remains a challenge, particularly in conflict-prone regions. Following this, Tlohang Letsie's chapter discusses the necessity of security sector reforms in post-conflict settings, focusing on the Lesotho Defence Force (LDF) and the Lesotho Mounted Police Services (LMPS). Letsie highlights the historical and political entanglement of these forces in the country's instability and emphasises the need for democratising and professionalising security forces to prevent future conflicts.

Chapter 12, by Brian Martin, critiques the economic, social, and political burdens imposed by African militaries, often used to suppress internal populations rather than defend against foreign threats. Martin advocates for a "social defence" system, where citizens use non-violent resistance – such as strikes, non-cooperation, and civil disobedience – against aggression, drawing on examples like Costa Rica's abolition of its military. However, the challenge lies in the lack of clear pathways for transitioning from militarised defence structures to non-violent systems in deeply entrenched societies. The last chapter by Oseremen Felix Irene foregrounds the role of peace infrastructures (I4Ps) in preventing conflict, highlighting structures like local peace committees, school peace clubs, and ministries of peace.

Irene demonstrates how these I4Ps help build sustainable peace by addressing the root causes of conflict through dialogue, trust-building, and community-led peace initiatives.

Geoff Harris's book offers profound insights into the root causes of conflict and provides a broad array of innovative peacebuilding approaches tailored for the African continent. The book underscores the significance of addressing structural inequalities, promoting indigenous methods of conflict resolution, integrating trauma healing into transitional justice mechanisms, and exploring economic interventions like BIGs as tools for peace. It also champions non-violent defence systems and emphasises the transformative role of education in fostering peace and justice. A recurring theme throughout the chapters is the potential of localised, community-driven peace infrastructures, such as peace committees and school peace clubs, in resolving conflicts and preventing violence. However, a notable weakness of the book is its limited exploration of how these promising solutions can be scaled and sustained in today's increasingly digitised world, particularly in regions with entrenched conflicts, fragile governance, or deep-rooted militarisation. The book does not adequately address the role that technology – such as digital communication platforms, artificial intelligence, and cybersecurity – can play in enhancing peacebuilding efforts, nor does it explore how these technological tools could be leveraged to support conflict resolution, trauma healing, and non-violent resistance. Future research could focus on integrating modern technological solutions into peacebuilding frameworks in the current and future digital landscape. Overall, this book is an invaluable resource for scholars, policymakers, peace practitioners, and students of conflict and development studies. Its interdisciplinary, context-specific approach makes it essential reading for anyone interested in African governance, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and international development.

Reference

Harris, G. ed. (2024) *The Elgar Companion to War, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Africa*. UK, Edward Elgar Publishing.