



# The Role of Customary Institutions in Building Youth Resilience to Violence in Africa

Synthesis Brief, 2022

## A. SUMMARY

Research on violence in young people is not very interested in the logics of non-violence that are present in these same contexts. The research promoted by the International Research and Development Centre (IDRC) through its *"Youth and Strategies for Resilience to Violence and Crime in Africa"* programme has placed this concern at the heart of its research objective. Research conducted in West Africa (Senegal and Burkina Faso) and East Africa (Tanzania) reveals, on the basis of case studies, that customary institutions are effective mechanisms in the resilience of young people to violence in contexts of violence.

This research echoes a long tradition of research within peace and security studies in Africa, arguing the existence of strong endogenous cultures of peace in the socio-cultural substrate of local societies and advocating for greater consideration of these peace policies.

## B. THE PROBLEM

While the logic of youth engagement in violence in Africa is increasingly being understood, prevention mechanisms and responses to this vulnerability are still proving to be ineffective. Under strong pressure from violent extremism, crime and the exacerbation of old conflictualities (political and community) in this mutating context, the risks of a greater exposure of vulnerable young people to these logics of violence are more than real. One of the reasons for the ineffectiveness of policies to protect young people sometimes stems from the theoretical and emergency rationalities on which such responses are based.

They mainly make young people who are carriers of violence, the priority targets for understanding and responding to violence. Such a focus often forgets that the majority of young people rarely choose violence. Moreover, it contributes perniciously to essentialising and

popularising a caricatured image of young Africa, perceived as a threat more than an opportunity.

Turning the logic of the analysis towards the silent majority of young people, by questioning the rationalities supporting their non-shift into violence, makes it possible to open fruitful perspectives in terms of preventive approaches and at the same time to deconstruct the global stereotypes of a youth abusively caricatured as violent.

The interest in this questioning is the cornerstone of a reflection led by researchers from the Gaston Berger University (Senegal) and the University of Dar-es-Salam (Tanzania) as part of the programme themed *"Understanding and overcoming the exposure of young people to violence, exclusion and injustice in Africa"*. These two researches are an integral part of 14 projects carried out in 12 African countries by several other research centres funded by the IDRC.

This synthesis brief focuses only on the results put forward by the two teams from the two aforementioned universities. Such an interest is linked to the originality of the analytical perspective highlighted. It highlights the importance of considering socio-community institutions and mechanisms in research on the factors of resilience of young people in the face of violence in Africa.

## C. RESEARCH FOCUS

Both researches were conducted in two geographically different African regions. One conducted in West Africa, specifically in Burkina Faso and Senegal by the Gaston Berger University (UGB). It focused on community-based conflict prevention and management mechanisms in Burkina Faso (Project No. 108394-00). The study questions endogenous practices considered as collective mechanisms of resilience to violence in a changing country. The other research, conducted in East Africa by

the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) in Tanzania, focused on a community mobilisation mechanism, "Nyumba Kumi", very present in Tanzania. This institution aims to ensure secure governance and a local justice offer.

#### **D. MAJOR RESULTS**

##### **1. A conceptual contribution to the analysis of resilience to violence**

As a central analytical concept in the research conducted, resilience has been understood in the sense that Luthar and Cicchetti (2000) see it as *"a dynamic process by which the individual demonstrates positive adaptation despite the experience of adverse conditions or significant trauma."* The researchers approached resilience in terms of the abilities, assets and attributes put forward by young people to avoid engaging in violence. Beyond avoidance, they have also operationalised resilience from the perspective of youth violence prevention practices, and therefore peacebuilding. In a more operational way, the Gaston Berger University team identified two types of resilience. To know:

(a) The primary resilience that characterises all young people who have never entered the cycle of violence; among the factors of primary resilience identified, i.e. preventing young people from falling into violence, education appears as the first factor followed by religious education. The values derived from cultural socialisation, in which parental and community figures in the broad sense play a key role, are the fundamental resource of the young person's ability to cope with violence. The less socialised the individual, the less ability to escape violence.

(b) secondary resilience, which concerns young people who, although having been in the cycle of violence, have managed to get out of it. Clarifications of the concept of resilience under various registers offer operational tools for understanding the phenomenon and define operational levels of intervention in a process of building this resilience.

##### **2. Traditional social institutions: mechanisms at the heart of conflict management and security provision**

Despite the geographical and cultural remoteness of the two fields, the research conducted by the teams leads to a similar overall conclusion: that of the strength of local customary institutions in building resilient behaviours among young people in the areas studied. This performative role of these institutions stems from the fact that they are the emanation of endogenous cultural processes and also act as normative mechanisms of socialisation around

strong moral, ethical and social values in which young people easily identify.

This important result echoes a long tradition of research within peace and security studies in Africa, arguing the presence of a rich endogenous culture of peace in the socio-cultural substrate of local societies.

In this regard, the security institution of "Nyumba Kumi" put forward in Tanzania is very close to the brotherhood of traditional "Dozo" Hunters widespread in West Africa, especially in communities of the Mandingo cultural air straddle several modern states (Arseniev 2007; Bassett 2004; Cissé 1994; Hellweg 2009; Koné 2018). The Dozo brotherhood is the institutional reflection of a magico-religious practice dating back to the Middle Ages. In fact, it is organised around a chain of community based associations that can be found in several localities. Well beyond religious worship, this institution socialises its followers around values of commitment, up to the ultimate sacrifice, for the safe protection of members of the entire community.

Initially confined to the rural areas of Mandingo communities, Dozo associations experienced a meteoric proliferation outside this spatial framework by integrating culturally diverse urban spaces strongly won by insecurity at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. The effectiveness of this alternative security offer is largely based on its local roots and its ability to play on collectively shared beliefs (Koné 2018).

The reference to community-based conflict management mechanisms highlighted by research in Burkina Faso confirms the wealth of community resources in the face of the multiple challenges of violence. "Joke kinship" or "joke alliances" are particularly one of the most symbolic social practices and institutions in the range of community peace infrastructures in West Africa. Long revealed by anthropologists and social historians, this atypical social relationship tending to neutralise and mock violent adversity, has rather known a greater heuristic interest on the occasion of the multiple violent crises associated with democratic reforms in West Africa.

The policies of peacebuilding and, in particular, of "post-crisis reconstruction" have widely publicised these endogenous mechanisms. Joke alliances are part of a wide range of traditional mechanisms when it comes to community-based conflict management tools. The Burkina Study is a useful reminder of the crucial role played, for example, by figures of authorities within

communities. The "culture of forgiveness", for example, is built and maintained in many African countries by means of a traditional engineering that is the palaver that relies on figures and resources of the territory.

#### **E. RECOMMENDATIONS: BUILDING A CULTURALLY ROOTED ARCHITECTURE OF PUBLIC PEACE OFFERING**

The results highlight lessons learned and provide operational perspectives for anti-violence policies.

##### **1. The inclusion and strengthening of customary and local institutions in the processes of preventing and combating violence in young communities is an important factor to consider.**

However, recourse to these institutions cannot be systematically generalised. In certain contexts, particularly politicised and dominated by ideologies of social stratification, certain customary institutions could reinforce the logic of domination and make the bed of discrimination against vulnerable social categories. Cultural and community roots are therefore not always a guarantee of social justice. This is why the processes of involvement in responses must be contextualised and backed by institutions with more consensual legitimacy.

**2. The legitimacy and strength of community institutions lies in their roots in cultural matrices that make sense and their proximity** (Bagayoko and Koné, 2017). This is an essential factor in the process of individual ownership, collective ownership and political legitimacy. The capacity of these institutions to adapt and be flexible to modern political issues is only possible if they are part of a logic of geographical and sociological proximity. It is not a question of opposing these traditional institutions to modern dynamics by describing them as obsolete. Above all, it is a question of working on their reinvention by inscribing new challenges in cultural matrices that make sense for communities.

This continuity is not to be grasped only in the superposition of institutional forms. Above all, it must be embodied in the spirit, norms, values, imaginaries, beliefs and principles shared by community. Research in Tanzania and Kenya rightly reports that one of the popular successes of the practice of "Nyumba Kumi" is the inclusion of this institution in local governance structures.

**3. Public education policies must promote the transmission of the principles of these mechanisms to the younger generations** through training: socialise the citizens of tomorrow to these mechanisms by integrating

into the school career of the latter training on these resilient endogenous values.

#### **F. FUTURE INVESTMENTS AND RESEARCH PRIORITIES**

The operationalisation of public policies of stability, inserted into cultural matrices of African contexts, also requires an adjustment of the agendas of social research. This research could be based on three priorities:

1. Deepen the reflection on the stability of African States from the perspective of community resilience and not only violence. The diverse experiences of community resilience in the face of political and even economic violence are excellent analysers to identify the basic mechanisms that can define more legitimate African States. An exhaustive analysis of these experiences from this culturalist angle would be a fruitful approach to think, in terms of political philosophy, of African States more stable;
2. Think about the concrete modalities of a fruitful articulation of community legitimacy with the requirements of a State more respectful of the rights of individuals and communities without discrimination;
3. Set up research mechanisms synchronised with the agendas for the implementation of more contextualised youth public policies.

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