THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENCE & TECHNOLEDGE

Role of Peace Committees in Conflict Transformation in Kuria Region, Migori County; Kenya

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Abstract:
Communities in the south western region of Lake Victoria live in fear and the emergence of vigilantes in the name of Amachuma, Chinkororo, Sungusungu and Itongo complicates the conflict handling mechanisms, not to mention the lethargy of the state in addressing this matter. This study endeavoured to identify and examine the conflict issues bedevilling the Kuria community with a view to generate sustainable peace building schemes, drawing lessons from similar scenarios in the Northern part of Kenya where peace committees have transcended the conflict-peace building trajectory of the pastoralist communities successfully. This paper examined the role played by Peace Committees in conflict transformation in Kuria region Migori county Kenya. Methodologically, the study utilized secondary sources with major emphasis on primary data collection.

Keywords: Peace committees, conflict transformation

1. Introduction

Odendaal (2010) indicated that the peace committees in Kenya were conceptualized way back in 1993 by a group of women in Wajir District, who in a sense were responding to the cycle of violence which had raged communities to deaths of about 1213 in a period of less than four years. The peace committees were formed partly due to the weak presence of government structures in the district, which led to the failure of state to regulate conflict, and the absence of relevant services including security and primary services. Secondly they were established as a way to appreciate the strong affiliation that communities had with their pastoral lifestyle which promoted keeping of large herds of cattle, and on the other hand, a wakeup call to pressurize nomadic communities adopt newer, modern ways of farming.

These two factors that the peace committees were responding to became dicier by the constant influx of refugees from Somalia and Ethiopia, but strongly the general acceptance that cattle raiding is legal, between and across such communities. The lack of social sanctions on people who performed cattle raids allowed for acquisition of light weapons and small arms, which made the district an inhabitable.

The Wajir Peace and Development Committee as it was known consisted of most civil society actors who previously would have been shut out by mainstream government peace building efforts. The Peace Committee worked closely with provincial administration and constructively engaged elders of different clans and set up a mediation process between them. Out of this process a peace building institution was born and came to be known as peace committees based in areas where conflict is prominent or common. Odendaal notes that peace committee provided space for the voice of those who would have not been heard for lack space or deliberate exclusion.

However, formalization of the peace committee became necessary, though without any legal recognition, as concerns for effective delivery of peace building and conflict handling processes became more pronounced amongst the key players and communities at large. It would have defeated the purpose upon which they were established if the peace committees had not provided any coordination to all peace makers and peace builders, within the paradigm of conflict transformation. Having been developed as the platform which opened doors to all participation, the peace committees allowed for the sustainable participation of communities, government agencies and CSOs, thus making it a pot of both indigenous and contemporary conflict prevention strategies.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Design
This study employed a case study research design which intended to obtain an in depth understanding on the peace committees and conflict management in Kuria region, Migori County; Kenya. This research design allowed the study to collect in depth data from the respondents using research instruments that included questionnaires, interview schedules, focus group discussions coupled with observation check lists which gave a detailed account of the role of peace committees in conflict management.

2.2. The Area of Study
The study was carried out in Kuria region, Migori County; Kenya. Kuria West is divided into 7 wards; Ikerege Ward, Isibania Ward, Mokerero Ward, Masaba Ward, Tagare Ward, Komosoko Ward and Getambwega Ward. While Kuria East which is divided into 4 wards namely; Ntimaru East, Ntimaru West, Nyabasi West and Nyabasi East. Kuria. Kuria region has a population of 256,086 (Census: 2009) and an area of 581 km². It is inhabited by Kuria people. The study focused on sub counties in Migori owing to the frequency of conflicts in the region as shown in figure 1 below of Kuria County Map
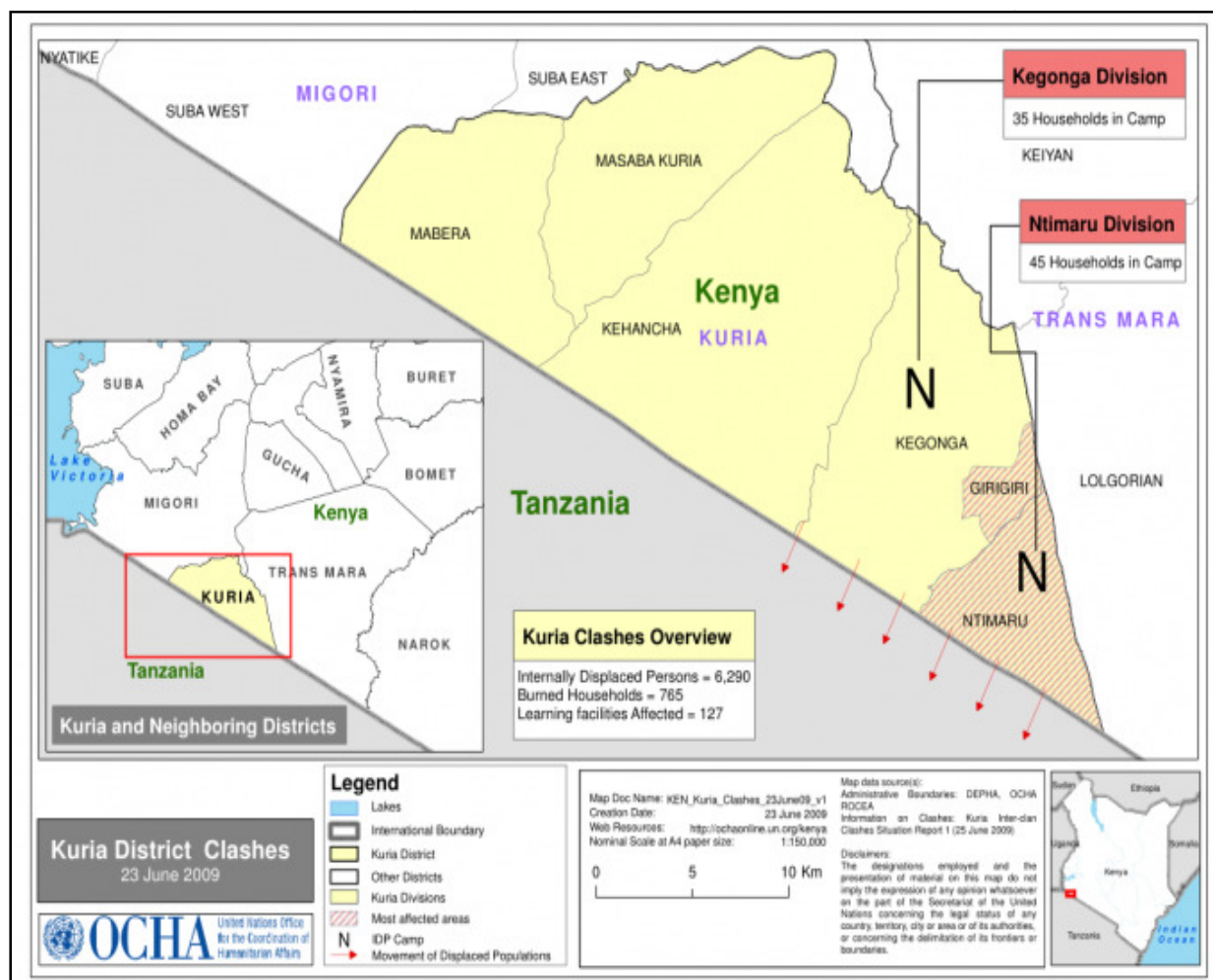

Figure 1: Kuria Administrative Boundaries, Migori County, Kenya
Source: (Migori County Development Plan, 2014)

2.3. Study Population
The study's target population was 256,086 according to (Kenyan Census 2009) being the entire population in Kuria East and West sub-counties. Within this population, the study keenly focused on certain members of the society and selected representation of peace committee, civil society organizations, administration, youths, women, people living with disability and elders.

2.4. Sampling Strategy and Sample Size Distribution
The researcher drew a sample following the recommendation of Kombo and Tromp (2006) of 10% to 30% to be a representative for a study population. While (Kalin 2006) recommended a 20% to 30% as ideal to represent a target population under study.

According to Mugenda & Mugenda (1999) a sample should be representative of the study area. This technique is used when representatives from each subgroup within the population need to be represented in the sample. A representative sample size with known confidence and risk levels of 95% and .05% respectively was selected, based on the work of Yamane (1967:258).

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where n is the sample size, N is the population size, and e is the level of precision.

Therefore, $n = \dfrac{256,086}{1 + 256,086(0.05)^2}$

n = 399

Particularly the researcher picked the maximum variation sampling also known as heterogeneous sampling in order to gain greater insights into a phenomenon by looking at it from all angles. This aided the researcher to identify common themes that were evident across the sample. In this context, as Oso and Onon (2009) in one each member of the target population stands an equal and independent chance to be included in the sample.

2.5. Data Collection
Triangulation which is the use of different methods to obtain different but complementary data on the same topic (Robson (2002), was appropriate for this study. Different sets of instruments were used to collect primary data, and this comprised of questionnaires, interview schedules, and observation score sheets. To further investigate what would have been collected from independent interviews, the study undertook 3 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The combination of data collection tools was selected offering the investigator an in-depth understanding of the nature and extent of the problem

2.6. Validity and Reliability of Data Instruments
The researcher used content validity so as to ascertain whether the tools measured what was stated in the objectives. This was done through cross checking with the supervisors. This meant that the researcher's content validity measures contained all possible items that were used in measuring the concept. In the study, a valid measure of 0.5 was acceptable as in spearman correlation coefficient.
The researcher used test and retest techniques where the same data instrument was administered twice to the same respondents after a period of 2 weeks. After the research instrument had yielded the same results the researcher went ahead and administered them to the selected samples in Kuria County; Kenya.

3. Results and Discussion
Data collected was gleaned, coded and analysed through Excel and SPSS and the results were as follows: -

3.1. The role of peace committees in fostering community unity
Findings of the study indicated that the concept of peace committee is understood as a vehicle for addressing conflicts in the community. It was therefore found that most community members could largely relate them to direct conflict issues and not other facets of the society that were an off-shoot of peace, like improving economic wellbeing, not unless it assumed a protective face, it was not considered as service from peace committees. The study discovered that peace committees are associated to issues that directly touch on conflict, security and liaison in the same vein. Peace committees are considered a reliable partner in conveying and retrieving information to and from mainstream institutions but particularly the government, as represented by the county administration (provincial administration). The unifying role played by the peace committees in the lenses of the public is conspicuous where issues of peace are threatened. A study by Glowaki and Gonc (2013) in trying to ascertain the potential of peace committees in Ethiopia discovered that they play an important role of mobilizing communities on common grounds, but specifically they devise ways of reaching to the grassroots to collect information that is found relevant for policy and strategic conversations, towards facilitation of peaceful coexistence. The study corresponded with findings by Pkalya and Adan (2006) who affirmed that Peace committees in fostering community unity played a role in relaying relevant information across sectors and groups, consulted and appealed to warring factions to create cease fire or stop unnecessary aggression, and revenge, particularly by the youth.
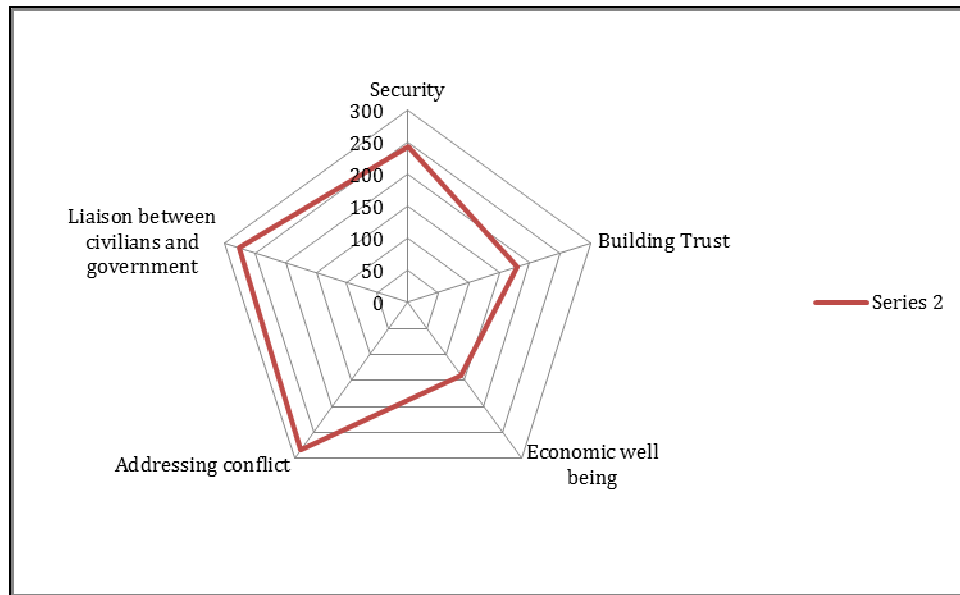
Figure 2: Peace Committees contribution to community unity

3.2 Peace Committees and Conflict handling processes

During the study, findings indicated that peace committees undertake a number of actions in an attempt to bring about harmony in the community they serve. Looking at the issues sought by the study, there was indication that peace committees are representative in terms of gender, although women in this community still face gender discrimination, which dents their contribution to any discourse. Secondly, the issue of political organization was treated silently as it was considered as a thorny issue and not Kenyan, as can be traced in the words of one peace committee member;

- "It is not easy for one to declare the political stand openly as this has had negative repercussions for those who do, more so in a conflict trodden scenario" (Kegoye, S 2014)

While the other issues like gathering and distributing information and those of security scored fairly well, lack of coordinated and structured meetings without incidents indicated the functional shortfalls by the peace committees. These revelations can be compared to the studies by Odendaal and Oliver (2009) who acknowledged that peace committees in their own unique way (depending with circumstances of the conflict), provide room for dialogue, community organizing, problem solving and intelligence gathering as well as distribution with a view to inculcate reconciliation amongst warring factions.
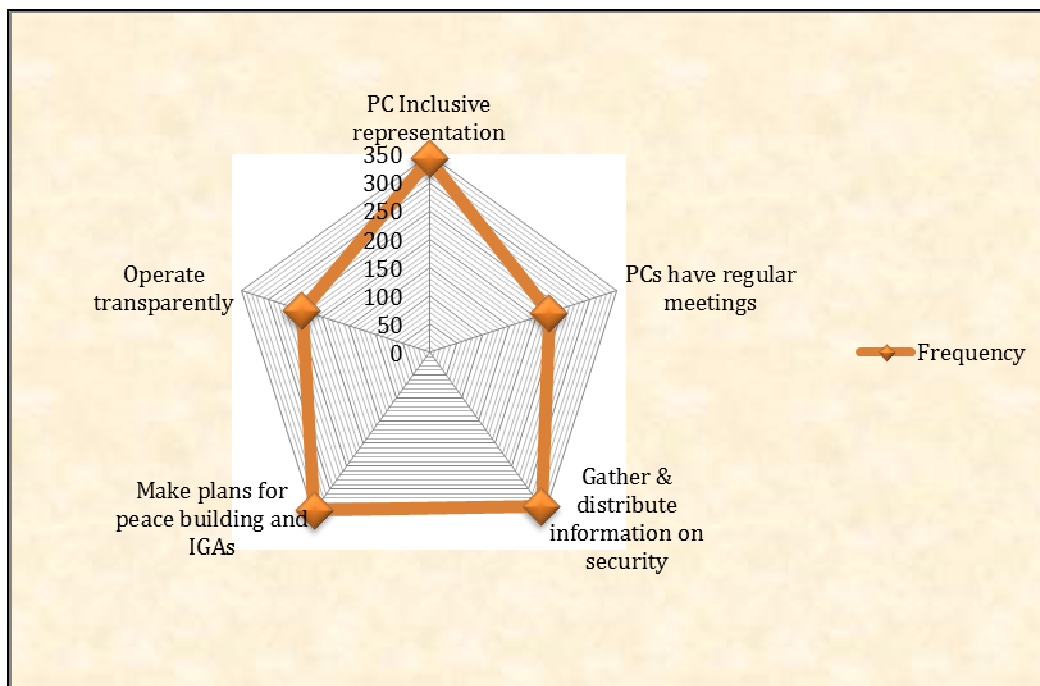

Figure 3: Peace Committees and Conflict handling processes

3.3. Peace Committees and Stakeholder Engagement

Most respondents shared that peace committees must be at the forefront to enhance inclusivity in conflict handling processes, but must be demonstrated by their own operations. Failure to have inclusivity in the peace committees provided an indication for the possibility of Peace Committees not engaging in thematic consultation(s) and working towards expanding space for the voiceless. On the other hand, lack of known programmes about building of capacities from the county to sub-location level and the sheer absence of continued training for the PC members was an insight on the inconsistencies that peace committees in terms of mobilizing community members towards consensus building on an issue of interest (peace related). In considering stakeholder engagement, which refers to the levels of ownership of conflict transformation or peace building, these findings are similar to those Haider (2009) who revealed that peace committees enhance the application of Community based approaches (CBA) where local communities (institution, groups etc.) were empowered by giving them direct control over investment decisions, project planning, execution and monitoring, through a process that emphasizes inclusive participation and management. The connection between Haider's work and this study is the fact that peace committees advance what is known as demand led approaches, allowing communities to come up with interventions which respond to their own needs. Taking charge of these processes contributes to a sense of community ownership, which can contribute to the sustainability of interventions. The community based approach has been adopted in fragile and conflict affected, and this can also be adopted in Kuria.
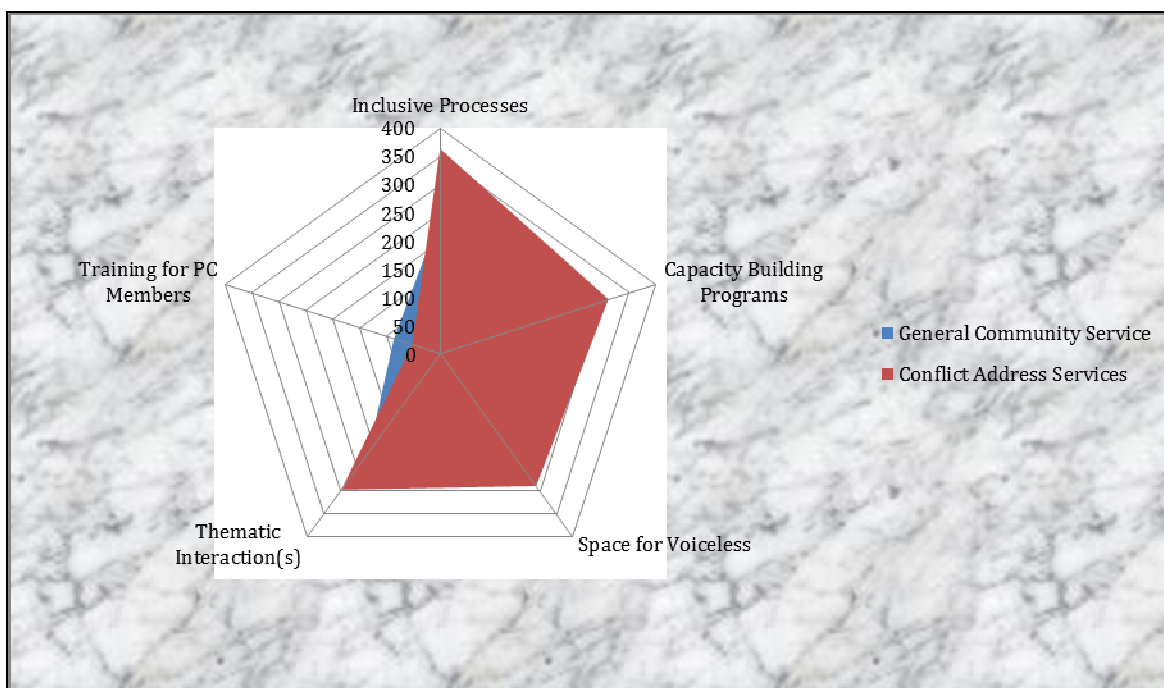

Figure 4: Peace Committees and Stakeholder Engagement

3.4. Peace Committees and Peace Practice

The findings of the study while looking at the specific actions executed by peace committees, revealed that most of the time the Peace Committees are involved in; monitoring the conflict scenario in places where such incidents are prominent; identifying conflict players and drawing intelligence about them; gathering information on the conflict issue and looking at the possible remedial scenario (scenario building); undertook mediation, negotiation and mobilization of warring parties and their supporters; and raising red flag on issues of human rights abuses. It is not lost to this study that other scholars have travelled this journey and come up with several findings. Among the many the work of Jenneker and Cartwright (2005) stands out pronounced who suggested that peace committees, with reference to the South African experience revealed the different roles that peace committees undertook in creating an environment of peace. Some of this included intelligence gathering or research on specific dispute issue, continuous dialogue for progressive problem solving, inter-clan and community reconciliation.

3.5. Peace Committees and Conflict Prevention

The findings of the study revealed that peace committees undertook a number of initiatives that curtailed violence among the Kuria people. The findings identified the following; gathering of information on issues of conflict(s) prevalent in a given region and developing possible solutions; identifying warring parties to a conflict and generating intelligence on the parties to the conflict; report possible conflict scenario to the relevant government agencies; mobilize the parties to a table for dialogue; invite other interested parties to the table for discussions.
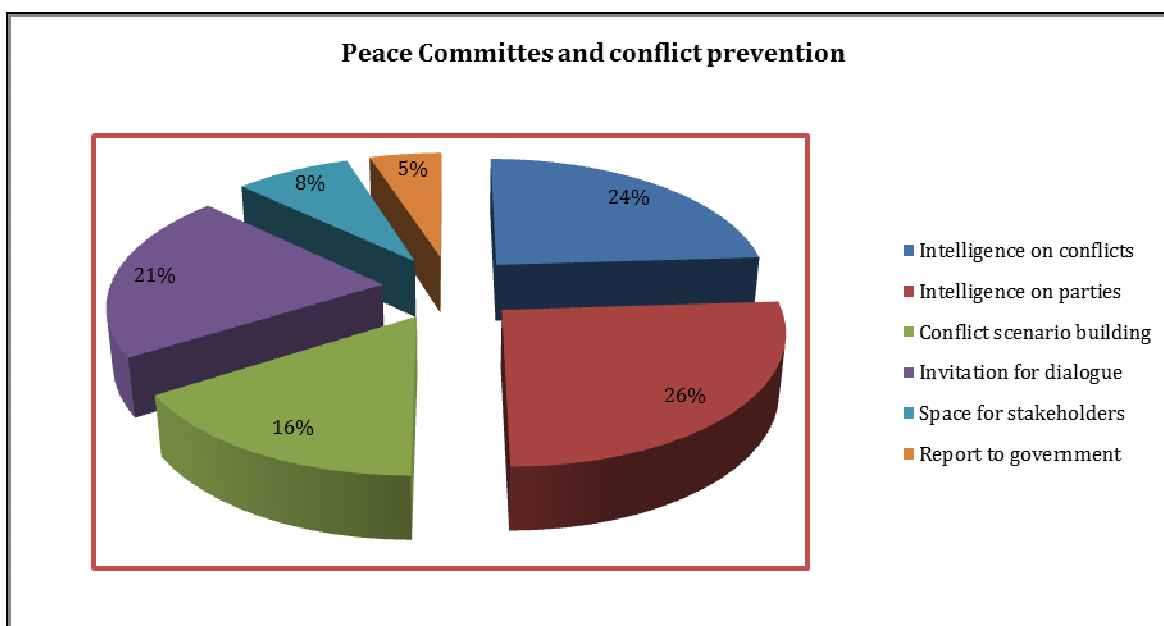
Figure 5: Peace Committees and Conflict Prevention

Peace committees as the study established spent most of their time gathering relevant intelligence on conflict issues and characteristics of the warring parties at 26% and 24% respectively, thus providing ample grounds upon which an early warning system could be established. This finding coincide with United Nations (2009) study where it was affirmed that availability of relevant information on conflict and parties to the conflict determines and quickens the response to avert emergence of violence. This assertion as the findings revealed can be related to the scenario building exercises undertaken by the peace committees, necessitating engagement in to dialogue, thus allowing for inclusion of government and other stakeholders in a way that demonstrates "the totality of a community suffering in solidarity rather than the selfish and myopic inward looking perspectives of most conflicting parties." The most significant part of the finding is the manner in which various activities were put in use in order to prevent conflict from happening or escalating. In this regard the study borrows from the work presented by Klopp et al (2008), who cited the linkages of peace committees to local dispute resolution institutions like council of elders, youth leadership and women participation. These roles made Peace Committees a bridge that aids in putting together local agreements and action plans allowing for informed scenario building and mapping out possible outcomes.

3.6. Peace Committees and Violent Crisis
In this study, the findings indicated that during violence peace committees played an important role owing to the acceptability and recognition they enjoy at the grassroots. It was found out that peace committees largely enable delivery of emergency services during crisis; they provide logistical support for secure transportation of emergency supplies; in some areas they offered trauma management support amongst victims and provided leadership on matters of evacuation. Peace committees are at the center of any crisis, more so where animosities scaled down service delivery by humanitarian organizations. Peace committees are well received at the grassroots and therefore have a reliable credibility which appeals to groups to allow for supplies to victims of violence whenever such unfortunate events take place.
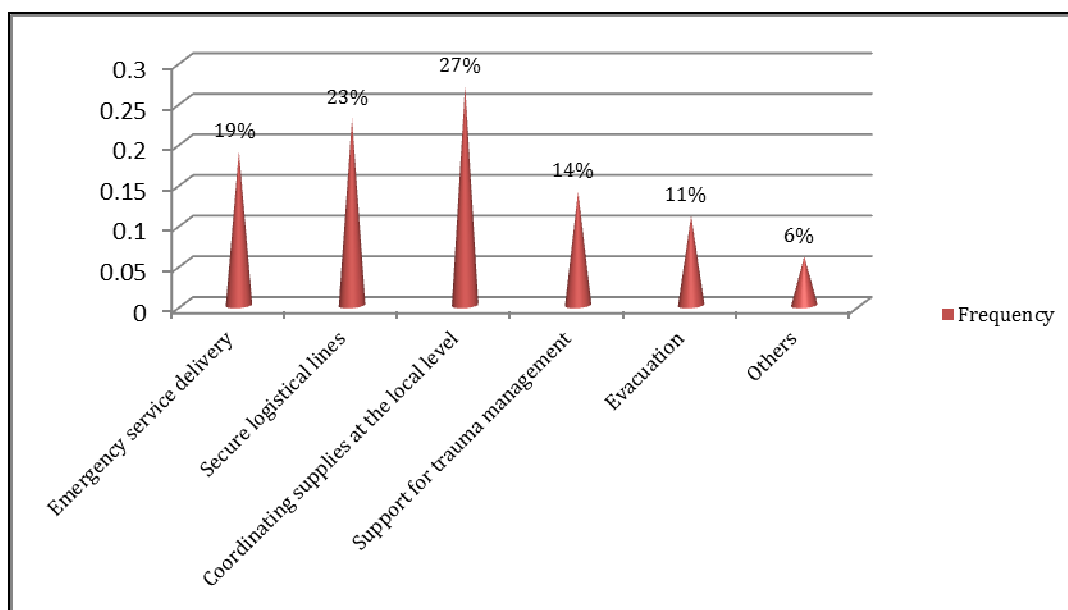
Figure 6: Peace Committees and violent conflict

Looking at the service delivery at 19%, securing logistical lines like roads at 23% and coordinating supplies at 27%, the study reveals the significance of a peace committee in a region where there is conflict, as it hastens faster and more inclusive ways of addressing conflict(s). These findings echo what Beyna, et al (2011) alluded to in their research that looked at peace building approaches in the Horn of Africa. Beyna, asserted that peace committees, if well-handled accumulated such massive credibility that during crisis, they enjoyed some privileges which ordinary person could not. One of the Key informants equated these peace committees to "*a small United Nations."*

3.7. Peace Committees and Conflict Transformation
The findings of the study emphasized the bigger role peace committees play in conflict transformation by providing an amiable environment in which effective dialogue takes place. It was observed and validated from the focus group discussions that peace committees, undertook diverse initiatives depending on the nature and circumstances of the problem including; mobilization of people to dialogue table; leadership in mediation and negotiation; problem solving; post conflict goodwill actions like disarmament, counseling, reintegration and mentoring coupled with creation and maintenance of peace dividend events.
It was revealed that communities who are parties to a conflict 72% of the times responded positively to calls by the peace committees, and were not treated with suspicion. Their multi-stakeholder representation provided an opportunity for open discussion and this mirrored credibility amongst the warring parties but in terms of legitimacy (acceptability) it did expand or spread the risk involved in the conflict making the sense of a bigger loss than just that of the parties involved directly. Buchannan and Olaa (2013) brought forth the argument that women previously were never considered as major players in sustaining conflict transformation whenever communities differed violently. This partly was because the societies were extremely patriarchal or simply out of apathy from women themselves. Buchannnan and Olaa made known the changes being experienced due to the presence of peace committees, where previously the marginalized would have no voice; the peace committees have provided the platform for doing so. In the case of Karamoja in Uganda, women have since recognized the fact that they play a key role in entrenching conflict, and in the same measure, required to reverse their activities like blessing men before raids, feeding them after successful raids and hiding the weapons on their behalf even if disarmament is executed, men and guns remain safe in the safety nets designed by their women.
To be more precise the study findings support work done by FAO and RECONCILE (2012) where it was established that peace committees, in trying to scale down the effect of conflicts between the Borana, Gunji and Konso, undertook several actions that included capacity building, civic education, organized exchange visits and mobilization of community support over issues of universal benefit to the warring parties.
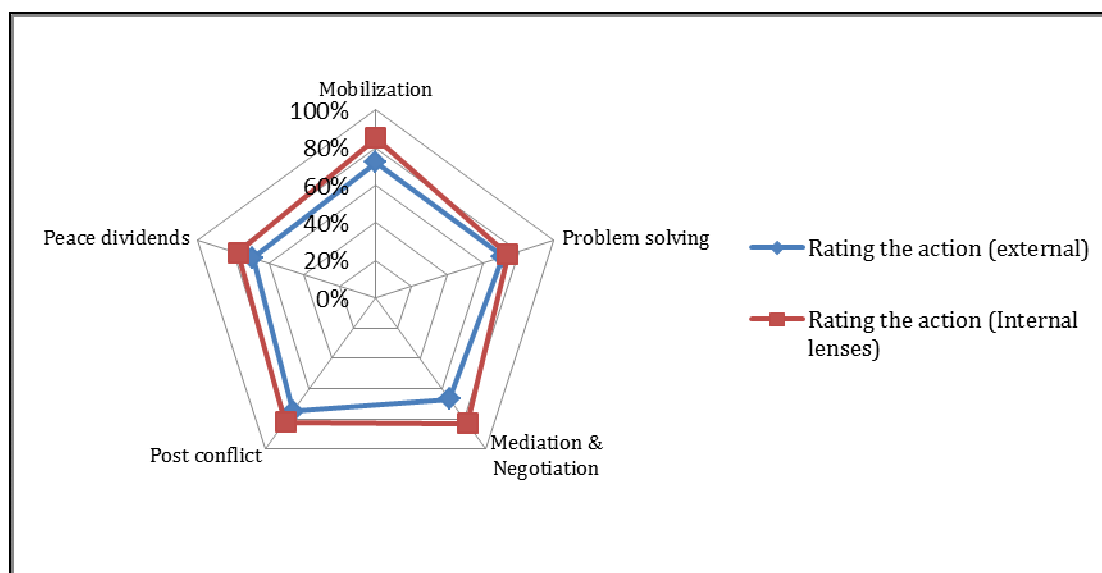
Figure 7: Peace Committees and Conflict Transformation

3.8. Peace Committees and Resilience building

Conflict transformation according to Lederach (2005), is the process that ultimately leads to peace, through an environment where theory of conflict moves in to theory of conflict-in-context thus enabling creation of new relationships capturing background perspectives like culture, governance arrangements, social roles, norms, place of law and development paths in a society. In this context the study revealed through focus group discussion that peace committees played a role in building resilience of communities through a number of ways including; Undertaking building of capacities where exposure was given for various aspects of conflict handling and peace building structures acceptable and thriving to the communities involved; created awareness and sensitized communities through forums like chief barazas, parents and teachers' meetings, and through distribution of relevant publications; encouraged and instituted exposure visits to other regions where conflicts had successfully been handled and harmony restored coupled with making conflict handling structures vibrant and mainstreaming the rule of law in alternative dispute resolution mechanisms. The study by FAO and RECONCILE (2012) offered a lot of value, as it captured some of the resilience mechanisms that community engaged in sustaining a peaceful co-existence among warring communities. Focusing on the Borana, Rendile, Samburu in Kenya and Somali, their study revealed that peace committees undertook awareness raising and sensitization to the rule of law, as well as linking traditional conflict transformation structure with the Judicial justice system, in order that what is outside their mandate then could find an appropriate response. One elder stated that;

- "These peace loving people do not tire talking to us on the negative effects of conflict. Each and every meeting I have attended in this community, I would usually find someone at least talking about peaceful co-existence, its only unfortunate that we do not listen till things get out of hand" (Nyanseba, L. 2014)

3.9. Limitations of Peace Committees

Peace Committees are structures in the peace reconstruction process which advance the participation of people particularly promoting community approaches in handling and transforming conflicts from violence to acceptable levels of harmony in the community. While this is true as Adan (2006) cited, the challenges facing peace committees, cannot be ignored. Findings of this study identified three key areas where peace committees suffer irredeemably and this is concerned with; absence of a sustainable legal and policy framework; poor funding; inadequate capacity to handle diverse and complicated conflict scenarios; and Political Interferences besides Patronage leadership. According to the District Peace Committee Chairperson, the members of the DPCs decry the government does not appreciate their efforts, yet they give a lot of their time, resources and skills while responding to conflict issues in the region. The chairperson stated thus;

- "My members including myself do not get any benefit out of this peace building work, though, this is supposed to be voluntary we have families, children to take care of school fees to pay and many other needs. This is frustrating particularly because when this process begun, members used to be given some kind of stipend, although this money was support from the UNDP. I would request that you recommend to the government through this research, to avail support for Peace Committees as they play an important role in the relative calm we enjoy in this region." (Motatiro, C, 2014)

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

The findings have made bare the role of each member of the Kuria community in regards to conflict transformation, with specific interest in the limitations they must contend with in trying to entrench peace building in their day to day undertakings. While peace committees are ideally meant to be a representation of the community ideals and proposals, their contribution is challenged for a number of reasons that the study has alluded to. Gender considerations in conflict handling and peace building remain one major area of concern among the Kuria. It was observed that the role of women and youth is still stunted due to the cultural practices that placed

both at the lower tier of societal importance, thus making their participation in decision making difficult and unattainable. This presented structural challenges in connection to the practicality of implementing a peace building scheme in the community. In that regard therefore, and due to the fact that this study did not contend to discern the specific roles of women and youth in conflict transformation among the Kuria, it so makes a proposal that this be considered as a research area in reining conflict in this region.

In totality, inadequate political goodwill amongst the leadership in the region made lame the efforts to quell the fires of violence. This was demonstrated by the high level of interference in peace committees, where politicians planted discord among the members thus making their work difficult to accomplish. This problem that was evident in all processes, found "legitimacy" in the structure of the peace committees, which made government, a strong party to local processes, yet there was revelation that some agents of the state were partially the reason for protracted conflicts.

The study observed a moral standpoint in regards to the structures of peace committees, conflict transformation and peace building processes, which hinged on patriotism, volunteerism and local ownership. Although this was heralded as the most important aspect of the peace building structures, it suffered from a moralist premise, which asserts that volunteerism and patriotism are not concepts that operate discriminately; they must run through the society. Unfortunately, looking at the structure of NSC and the peace committees and contextualizing the ad hoc approach, it depicted a "supply and demand" kind of approach, thus making peace building an *"event or business venture"* rather than a process. The upper echelons of NSC were a permanent structure attracting remunerations while the peace committees were vehicles of volunteerism, these two systems were not compatible, and therefore a source of discontent. In that regard, this study proposes that some research be undertaken to ascertain of the structure of NSC, factoring in the law enforcement agencies and the county administration plays a role in building peace across Kuria people.

Conflict transformation and peace building required certain levels of skills, expertise and knowledge in order to help midwife the construction of harmony within and out of the Kuria community. The study found that peace education was inadequate and inconsistent. Most peace committees and members of the public seen in the lenses of stakeholders, highly depended on nongovernmental organizations in accessing relevant peace education, and this had its own limitations. It presented the difficulty of establishing a reference point where people interested in peace building could find recourse in developing knowledge, expertise and information relevant to such a discourse. Although the county commission administration is prominent in the peace committees, it did not provide meaningful interactions to enable peace seekers nurture a culture of knowledge banking. The question that this study may seek other researcher to look at is the role played by National, County administration (Provincial Administration) in the development of peace structures in Kuria region, Migori county; Kenya

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