Leveraging Research on Sustainable Peace in Africa: A Timely Intervention of ARUA/UKRI Project[1]

Introduction and Problem Definition

Research is a way of examining fact and value of any discipline. It is undertaken within most professions especially in academics. More than a set of skills, it is a way of thinking, examining critically the various aspects of our professional, educational and academic work. It is a habit of questioning what you do, and a systematic examination of the observed information to find answers with a view to instituting appropriate changes for a more effective academic and policy-oriented work. Research is a structured enquiry that utilizes acceptable scientific methodology to solve problems and create new knowledge that is generally applicable. Research is a process of collecting, analyzing and interpreting information (data) to answer research and policy questions. Research findings heavily contribute for policy formulation in different sectors, including in peace and security issues (focus of the project under implementation).

However, the rich potential of research to advance peace and development, scientific peace research, at most is not on the top of any discussion agenda, although there are glimpse changes taking place. The other challenge is that peace research is conducted in fragmented ways, with many of the interested researchers working in individual isolated contexts. Knowledge products such as masters and doctoral dissertations in most African universities often lie idle, unused, collecting dust on the shelves of university department libraries, and maybe known only within small circles of academicians. Great effort is required to unplug this huge gap that exists through repackaging and making peace knowledge easily accessible to policy makers and different stakeholders and actors involved in promoting peace.

Opportunities to launch sustainable peace processes for Africa's developmental agenda have been severely constrained by political instability, leadership and management deficit, civil strife and abject poverty. These negative conditions are preventing Africa from achieving the transformation that is needed to face the challenges of highly competitive and open global environment. The present state of the African society as characterized by these negative features is bringing into focus issues of sustainable peace, democracy, good governance, rule of law, economic and social development. The complexity of today's conflicts requires that peace be understood in new ways and that

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the approach to peace research be reinvented altogether. Peace research now forms an essential component of any strategy for understanding and promoting peace and security. Because the challenges for peace and security continuously change, the knowledge required for comprehension and response to the persistence of violent conflict demands clear-sighted research.

Sustaining Peace and the UN Agenda for Peace and Development

Sustainable peace is conceptualized as both 'a goal and a process to building a common vision of a society, ensuring that the needs of all segments of the population are taken into account' in 'activities aimed at preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict, addressing root causes, assisting parties to conflict to end hostilities, ensuring national reconciliation, and moving towards recovery, reconstruction and development'.

The concept of sustaining peace calls for better linkages between the UN's three foundational pillars of peace and security, development, and human rights, in addition to humanitarian action. It replaces what until now has been a sequential approach to conflict that often resulted in silos—notably silos of prevention, humanitarian action, peacekeeping, peacebuilding and development—and calls for better linkages and sharing of instruments across these different sets of responses. Sustaining positive peace, becomes a transformational imperative for a long-term vision of building a common, inclusive vision of society that considers all points within the conflict cycle—not only in post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation, but also in early the prevention efforts of addressing the 'root causes of conflict' as well as in 'prevention of the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict'[2]. Reinforced by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which stresses the key role of local ownership in achieving sustainable development, and which aspires to 'peaceful, just and inclusive societies', sustaining peace becomes 'people-centered and inclusive in approach[3].

Underpinning the concept 'blockages' to peace and development is the theory of transformative change which examines and embraces the concept of 'sustaining peace', as affirmed in the 2016 UN's overarching conceptual framework for building peace, through identical resolutions issued by the UN Security Council and the UN General

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[2] U.N. General Assembly and Security Council "peacebuilding resolutions" (A/RES/70/262 and S/RES/ 2282).

[3] Institute for Economics & Peace. Positive Peace Report 2020: analyzing the factors that sustain peace, Sydney, December 2020. Available from: http://visionofhumanity.org/resources

Assembly[4]. Breaking new ground conceptually, the April 2016 UN resolutions focus on sustaining peace "at all stages of conflict and in all its dimensions" and on the imperative to prevent "the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict", in response to troubling trends such as the spike in violent conflict worldwide and unparalleled levels of forced displacement[5].

The ARUA/UKRI Capacity Building Project for Sustaining Peace in Post-Conflict Societies

The UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) in partnership with the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) has provided financial support for the implementation of a capacity-building project. The project is implemented by the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS), Addis Ababa University (AAU) in partnership with Haramaya University from Ethiopia, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria; Protestant University of Central Africa, Yaounde, Cameroon; University of Hargeisa from Somaliland/ Somalia; Africa University from Zimbabwe; and Manchester University under the umbrella of African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) and the Global Challenges Research Fund (ARUA-UKRI-GCRF). The timeframe of the project is from January 2021 to December 2023.

The general objective of the research support is geared towards understanding blockages to peace and specifically focuses on: (i.) Understanding why effective accountable and inclusive institutions have not been built in conflict-affected or post-conflict societies(ii.) Understanding the dynamics of blockages to peace construction with a primary focus on factors, actors, internal and external dynamics, including the reasons for not implementing peace deals (iii.) Examining factors that hinder peace at the local, national and regional levels. What   these obstacles are, where they come from and how they can be overcome? Hence, the research aims to contrast the local and narratives of the factors that foster direct and structural violence (iv) Establishing a post-conflict studies network comprised of universities in the network.

The project aims to develop research capacity in all partner universities through supporting PhD students, and post-doc peace researchers in their research projects. To this end, the project will provide financial support and training that will help researchers improve their research capacities; create   opportunities and platforms for researchers to expand their researches and   networking through workshops aimed at strengthening

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[4] U.N. General Assembly and Security Council "peacebuilding resolutions" (A/RES/70/262 and S/RES/ 2282).
[5] Ibid.

skills and knowledge that enable researchers to disseminate research findings to continental and international audiences.

As such, the specific objectives of the project are to:

1.   Strengthen the capacity of partner universities to effectively and efficiently support peace research in Africa

2.   Supporting graduate students and researchers in their research efforts/projects
3.   Facilitate opportunities and platforms for researchers to expand their research networks
4.   Enhance knowledge sharing through dissemination of findings of undertaken research to different stakeholders.

The project is informed by the concept of 'blockages' to peace and development as analytical tools to understand post-conflict violence as an obstacle to sustainable development and peace. The ARUA/UKRI project is currently being implemented in the five countries where the hub-spoke universities are located. The five countries have witnessed differentiated situations of instability and economic challenges as a result of the violence and conflicts in their respective contexts. Because of the political tensions and pockets of violence that has and is still taking place, state institutions have been weakened and the economy of Zimbabwe has taken a slump resulting in creating hyperinflation, unemployment and trade deficits. On the other hand, Nigeria, one of the biggest oil exporting countries of the world is experiencing economic hardships because of the many years of economic mismanagement arising from corruption and inequalities in redistributing oil revenue and ongoing violent conflicts (Boko Haram insurgency being one of them). Ethiopia though had seen years of stable economic growth; it is currently facing economic challenges as a result of recent civil uprisings, tensions, and violent conflicts. The fourth country Cameroon though previously known for its stability has in recent years faced serious security concerns and challenges including military operations against secessionist insurgencies, attacks by the Islamic militant group Boko Haram and worsening humanitarian crisis. The fifth, Somaliland is also a post conflict state that has been affected by the instability of its neighbours in general and Somalia in particular.

The project has, accordingly, unveiled a training opportunity in social science research methodology to students of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife and neighbouring Universities who are pursuing a master's or PhD degree. The general objective of the training is to improve the research capacities of master's and PhD students and early researchers. The training covers nature of scientific methods and its application to social

phenomenon; nature, importance and scope of research; types of research; steps in the process of research; types of research design; concepts in research; various tools and procedure of data collection; qualitative research designs; mixed-method research; application of statistics in social science research; database management and techniques; data collection, management and analysis (both qualitative and quantitative); report and project proposal writing; and field report writing and presentation. The project has organized four research methodology training workshops at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife drawing participants from different disciplines.

In addition, the project has provided the following grants to PhD level students and post-doc researchers of Obafemi Awolowo University; Ile-Ife, Nigeria

1. Ten PhD grants.
2. Eight grants to publish peer reviewed articles in recognized journals.
3. Five grants to publish policy briefs.

Challenges /Mitigation

Although the project has made due progress since its inception in 2021, there are certain challenges that have been faced, which have been mitigated through creative means or where possible resolved. These are:

• Slow pace of budget transfer to collaborating universities due to financial processes and international bank transactions involving multiple banks.

• The use of different academic calendars across collaborating universities has proven to be a challenge in some case where activities need to be synchronized.

• The unexpected breakout of COVID-19 in 2020 resulted in the launching of the project to be postponed to January 2021, which eventually slowed down the implementation of certain activities, especially when it comes to travel.

• The reality of project stakeholders residing at distant locations and the situation with COVID-19 has necessitated the use of virtual platforms for convening.

• The eight months strike by the Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities (ASUU), which resulted in the closing down of public Universities in Nigeria in 2022 also slowed down the implementation of activities in accordance to the work-plan and approved budget of the project. Currently, the Obafemi Awolowo University is striving to meet up the pace of other collaborating institutions in the implementation of activities. However, with timely release of funds, there has been an acceleration of activities recently to make up for the lost time during the strike.

Conclusion

Africa's future calls for the development of a research culture that nurtures the next generation of peace researchers ready to interrogate issues using transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary lenses in search of homegrown solutions to Africa's challenges. This is because researchers now recognize that violence and instability are the key blockages to sustainable peace and development. There is also a need for a peace building initiative that emanates from the communities. Most interventions by international donor organizations do not take into consideration socio-political peculiarities. To this end, the PhD and post-doctoral research supported projects will be underpinned by a deep commitment to broadening inclusion and ownership on the part of all stakeholders across the partner institutions where this project is implemented. This emphasis on inclusion and local ownership also connects with ARUA's objectives which are strongly embedded within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.