

Dealing with conflicts in Laikipia West – Volunteers as ambassadors for peace and conflict managers

Abstract

This study investigates the role of peace ambassadors from St. Martin CSA in conflict resolution within Laikipia West, Kenya, where inter-ethnic tensions have historically exacerbated through drought and resource scarcity. Utilizing qualitative methods, this study involved in-depth interviews with seven peace ambassadors and two local chiefs to understand their motivations, community perceptions, conflict challenges, and resolution strategies. Findings reveal that peace ambassadors are distinguished community leaders driven by a profound commitment to peace, influenced by spiritual beliefs and a desire to serve. Peace ambassadors use their local knowledge and cultural understanding to mediate disputes primarily between pastoralists and farmers. They adopt a proactive, directive approach to conflict resolution, focusing on calming tensions, listening to both sides, and guiding parties toward mutual understanding and forgiveness. Their work is situated within a context marked by structural and cultural violence stemming from poverty and competition over resources. The study highlights the importance of integrating traditional conflict resolution methods with contemporary practices, suggesting a hybrid model that preserves cultural integrity while fostering effective legal accountability. This research underscores the critical role of peace ambassadors in enhancing social cohesion and calls for further exploration into adaptive conflict resolution frameworks in community settings.

Key words: Volunteers, peace ambassadors, village elders, conflict management, Laikipia West

1. Introduction:

St. Martin CSA is a faith-based, community-driven organization that aims to empower local communities and promote a just society. Its Philosophy, "Only through community," is centred around finding sustainable solutions to the challenges faced by community members. Moreover, St. Martin is committed to raising awareness and addressing critical issues affecting the community, such as mental health, children's rights, climate change, peaceful conflict resolution, and gender-based violence, among others.

With a team of over 500 dedicated volunteers and staff members, St. Martin is actively working towards its goals. As a colleague at St. Martin, the researcher had the unique opportunity to conduct a study on one group of community volunteers in Laikipia West, the Peace Ambassadors.

In Laikipia West, conflicts have historically plagued the region due to tensions between diverse ethnic groups, which were exacerbated by the devastating effects of drought. Recognizing the gravity of the situation, St. Martin has responded by partnering with volunteers from various sub-locations in Laikipia West. These dedicated individuals have been designated as peace ambassadors, working tirelessly to foster harmony and understanding within their communities. The researcher had the opportunity to meet with peace ambassadors from four distinct sub-locations, conducting in-depth interviews to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences. The aim of this research is to explore:

- Who are these peace ambassadors and what motivates them?
- How do they describe their community/area where they live in? What are conflicts they deal with?
- How do they deal with conflicts?
- How do they work together with the area chiefs?
- And most importantly what are the skills needed to be a peace ambassador?

The primary objective of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of the peace ambassadors' experiences, perspectives, and perceptions, with the ultimate goal of informing future interventions and research aimed at promoting peace and conflict resolution in Laikipia West.

2. Background: Conflicts and violence in Laikipia West

Before going into details on the conflicts in Laikipia west, we are going into some definitions of peace, violence and conflict theories. Johan Galtung, a Norwegian peace researcher, also referred to as the "father of peace studies," has made significant contributions. He defines peace as extending beyond the absence of war, distinguishing between two types: positive peace and negative peace (Galtung 1969). Negative peace, according to Galtung, refers to the absence of direct physical violence between individuals, groups, or nations. Galtung argues that negative peace is necessary but not sufficient condition for true peace. In other words, the absence of physical violence is a necessary step towards peace, but it does not guarantee the existence of positive peace. Positive peace, on the other hand, focuses on positive relationships between individuals and groups. It involves:

1. The presence of human well-being: People have access to basic needs like food, shelter, healthcare, education, and security.
2. The presence of social justice: There is equity and fairness in the distribution of resources and opportunities.
3. The presence of freedom and participation: People have the ability to participate in decision-making processes and enjoy basic freedoms.

Galtung defines violence as "the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is" (1969). This definition extends beyond the realm of physical violence, encompassing any action that diminishes the fulfilment of basic human needs below what is feasible (Galtung, Fischer 2013). He highlights the concept of structural violence, also referred to as "invisible violence" or "institutionalized violence," which is ingrained in the social structures and institutions of society. This type of violence fosters inequality, discrimination, and exploitation, often perpetuated by those in power or by systems that uphold the status quo. Notably, structural violence can manifest in various forms, including environmental degradation (Galtung, Fischer 2013).

In addition to structural violence, Galtung later introduced the concept of cultural violence. He describes cultural violence as the mechanisms through which dominant cultures perpetuate oppression and marginalization, employing cultural practices, symbols, and narratives. Galtung asserts that cultural violence can be equally damaging as physical violence, noting that "Cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look and feel right, or at least not wrong" (Galtung, Fischer, 2013, 36). Cultural violence operates within the symbolic sphere of our existence—encompassing elements such as religion, language, ideology, and science—and can be wielded to legitimize both structural and direct violence. By examining these interrelated forms of violence, Galtung encourages a deeper understanding of how inequalities are maintained and challenged within society (ebd.).

Galtung's conflict theory suggests that conflicts arise from a range of factors, including economic, political, cultural, and psychological differences between individuals and groups. He argues that conflicts are often the result of misunderstandings, misperceptions, and miscommunications.

Laikipia West is a constituency in Laikipia County, located in central Kenya. This area is known for its diverse landscapes, including semi-arid areas. Laikipia West is notorious for its history of inter-ethnic conflicts and violence, which encompasses both direct and indirect forms of harm. According to Jacqueline Wanjiku, Isaac Tarus, and Dorothy Nyakwaka (2023), the roots of these conflicts can be traced back to the colonial era. The displacement of pastoralists and the purchase of farms by colonizers led to the settlement of other groups as workforce for the farms, creating tension and competition for resources. Wanjiku et al. (2023) state that ethnic clashes in Laikipia West are often attributed to rivalry between individuals from different ethnic groups. Factors such as strong ethnic identity, political tensions, inadequate pastures, and compromised political systems contribute to these conflicts. Moreover, resource scarcity during times of drought tends to exacerbate the situation.

Kenyan society is characterized by a strong emphasis on ethnic identity, with many individuals identifying strongly with their ethnic group. Furthermore, there are significant differences between the way of living between farmers and those who are pastoralists, which can lead to clashes between these two groups, especially when during drought where grazing ground are scares and water is limited. In addition, cattle rustling has been a persistent problem among pastoral communities in Kenya, particularly among the Pokot, Turkana, and Samburu tribes. This has also affected the life in some areas in Laikipia West (Ogeto 2023). It is clear that the conflicts in Laikipia West are complex and multifaceted, rooted in historical factors such as colonialism and exacerbated by contemporary issues like

3. Approaches to conflict management

There are many multifaceted approaches to conflict resolution mainly developed by European and US American researchers and practitioners. Negotiation is a popular approach that involves finding a mutually acceptable agreement through compromise. Mediation is another approach that involves a neutral third-party facilitating communication between parties. Alternative dispute resolution methods such as arbitration and conciliation are also used to resolve conflicts in various contexts.

Research about conflict management in African societies shows that traditional conflict management methods exist within communities. According to Ruto Pkalya, Mohamud Adan, and Isabella Masinde (2004) indigenous conflict management and resolution mechanisms rely on local actors and traditional community-based judicial and legal decision-making processes to resolve conflicts within or between communities. Research has also emphasized the crucial role of elders in African societies, which has remained resilient despite the impact of colonialism and the introduction of Western legal systems. In Africa, traditional justice systems have been in place for centuries, with elders playing a vital role in resolving disputes. (Kariuki 2015). Kariuki argues that the institution of elders remains a significant mechanism for conflict resolution in Africa, offering a culturally sensitive approach to resolving disputes and restoring social equilibrium. A case study in Pokot, Turkana, Marakwet, and Samburu communities in Kenya confirms this. Due to limited access to courts and modern facilities, these pastoralist communities rely heavily on traditional justice systems to manage conflicts and maintain social order. (Kariuki 2015) In these communities, elders play a vital role in preventing and resolving disputes. They determine the use of water and grazing areas as well as migration patterns, and participate in arbitration, mediation, dialogue, negotiation, and other dispute resolution processes within and between ethnic groups. Elders can even enter into peace pacts with other communities. (Pkalya 2004).

In Kenya, elders play a significant role as volunteers in public governance. Acting as local leaders, they effectively represent their communities and facilitate public participation, as highlighted in the phenomenological analysis by Mutua and Kiruhi (2021). The contribution of elders is particularly relevant to this study, as many peace ambassadors are also village elders. This overlap may suggest similarities in their roles and responsibilities.

4. Methodology of the Study

The study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the rich insights and stories of the peace ambassadors, seeking to capture their nuanced perspectives and experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of nine participants, including seven peace ambassadors and two chiefs from various sub-locations. For two peace ambassadors there was a translation from Kiswahili to English. The interviews were conducted during two exchange visits between peace ambassadors from different sub-locations, allowing for a unique opportunity to gather diverse perspectives.

Peace Ambassador 1	Male, 30 years old	Diploma
Peace Ambassador 2	Female, 44 years (Interview translated)	Primary school
Peace Ambassador 3	Female, 46 years	Secondary school
Peace Ambassador 4	Female 50 years, (interview translated)	Primary school

Peace Ambassador 5	Male, 45 years	Primary school, did not finish secondary school
Peace Ambassador 6	Female 36 years	Primary school, dropped secondary school
Peace Ambassador 7	Male, 42 years	Primary school
Chief 1	Male	Not known at least secondary school
Chief 2	Male	Not known, at least secondary school

The interviews were transcribed, and an inductive content analysis (Mayring 2000) was conducted with the support of QDA lite software.

5. Main results of the study

As previously mentioned, the primary objective of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of peace ambassadors and their approaches to resolving conflicts within their communities. To achieve this, the first step is to explore how these volunteers perceive and describe their communities. This will provide a foundation for understanding their perspective on the social, cultural, and environmental contexts in which they operate. In particular, we are interested in learning about how peace ambassadors define and characterize the communities they live in, including their experiences, challenges, and relationships within those communities. By examining these aspects, we can gain a richer understanding of the complex dynamics that shape their work as peacebuilders and inform their approaches to conflict resolution.

5.1 How are the peace ambassadors and chiefs describing their communities?

Most interviewees responded to this open question by highlighting the challenges faced by the community.

5.1.1. Challenges in the community: Poverty, unemployment, drug abuse and domestic violence

The interviewed peace ambassadors and area chiefs hail from four distinct sub-locations, providing a diverse range of perspectives. Regarding the economic status, one peace ambassador reported that her sub-location is relatively unaffected, with only a few cases of vulnerability. In contrast, the other peace ambassadors interviewed highlighted the pervasive economic crisis and its related challenges in their respective areas:

“Some are very hungry. Some have spent even two days without food. There is a lot of conflict there in our areas. Between men and women. In marriages there is a lot of difficulty. It is due to the problem of poverty in that area. Because it is an area which is not developed.” (Peace Ambassador 6).

“The problems amount during time of drought: Poverty. Economic. Because many people depend on farming. They are self-employed. They are not employed. So, when you lack harvest. Too many troubles can be there to that marriage.” (Peace Ambassador 6)

Peace ambassadors in our study have identified a strong correlation between poverty and domestic violence, as well as a connection between poverty/unemployment and drug abuse, particularly among the youth. These observations suggest that economic instability can have far-reaching consequences, perpetuating cycles of violence and substance abuse within communities.

“The community you meet there is a lot of drug abuse. Those young youths. They are very drug abused. Some are depressed. They have depression. Because of the situation that they are passing through. (...) You meet a parent. He, he, he because of lack of economy. He leaves the child, not to continue with education. So, you meet that boy or girl. She is desperate. She is depressed. So, she enters in the drug abuse.” (Peace Ambassador 6).

“And we have been, as a youth, if I can use the youth as a context, see that there is a lot of problem the youth go through. Maybe the issue to do with drugs and and alcohol, drug abuse, due to unemployment (...) Because if a youth doesn't have any job, then it means that he's suffering from economic crisis. It's kind of a conflict.” (Peace Ambassador 1)

It shows that many young people struggle to complete their education due to financial constraints, leading to feelings of despair and depression. The lack of job opportunities only adds to their frustration, leaving them without a sense of purpose or direction. This can have devastating effects on their mental health, self-esteem, and overall well-being which also can lead to drug abuse.

5.1.2 A cosmopolitan community

Several respondents described their communities as cosmopolitan hubs where people from diverse ethnic backgrounds coexist in harmony:

“This community are good people. They are not bad. They understand one another. They live together. They co-exist. Even if they are of different tribes, they co-exist together. They are good people.” (Area Chief 1)

“As soon as Laikipia it is a cosmopolitan county, it it has ehm it has a face of Kenya, that is having more than one tribe, and especially where I live, there I can say all the tribes are there. I am a Luo, there are Kisi, there are Luyas, those are the, (.) how do we call them, the minorities. We also have Kikuyus, Turkanas, and others, making up Kenya as a nation.” (Peace Ambassador 3)

“Okay, in my area, it is a, it is a cosmopolitan area that has many communities, and the majority are the Kikuyus, Kalenjin, Turkana there are about 40 tribes. But we live in a good coexistence, (..) because for the last 12 years I have been in service, we are living in a good coexistence.” (Area Chief 2)

While one peace ambassador describes the community as peaceful, it becomes evident that beneath the surface, conflicts simmer. This paradox highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of community dynamics, where coexistence and cooperation exist alongside tensions and disagreements.

“She is coming from the community of pastoralists, who takes care of cows, and it's a peaceful community. It's a peaceful community. From her community, because they are taking care of cows. Many times, the children go to graze from different places, and maybe sometimes the cows go beyond eating somebody's things in the garden. So that one causes a bit of conflict. So that causes conflicts in her community, but other things, they are at peace. And they do encourage people to take their children to school. In the past, they were being disturbed also by alcohol. There was a lot of alcoholism in the community, but they have sorted out the issue.” (Peace Ambassador 2, translated)

The interviewee's subtle hints at conflicts in the community suggest that the community is not as peaceful as described. Her description of children allowing cows to graze in restricted areas implies that this is a recurring issue, and her explanation that it's due to children being careless rather than a deliberate act may be an attempt to downplay the problem. Moreover, her mention of alcoholism in the community, which was previously resolved, raises questions about her claim that her community is peaceful. Furthermore, her statements may have been influenced by the training she received through St. Martin and the presence of a European interviewer. For example, her statement on children being taken to school may have been emphasized because of these factors.

One peace Ambassador emphasizes that the different tribes live in co-existence, but that that was not always the case. He recalls a violent conflict between the Pokots and Samburu in 2007, which was

eventually settled. According to him, the Samburu emerged victorious, leading to the Pokots being forced to leave their land. This narrative challenges the notion that the different tribes coexist peacefully.

"Yes, we dealt with conflicts, but not recently. It was around 2007, when the Pokots were fighting over this land with the Samburu. And the Pokots, it's like the Samburu won the war. Now the Pokots were pushed to the other side of the world. But nowadays we mingle. We are allies. Those who have gone to school and know human rights, we settled that conflict and tried to show them this is not good. Because we all belong to one God." (Peace Ambassador 5)

The peace ambassador's assertion that there is peace in the area today suggests a trivialized view of conflict, implying that it only refers to violent situations. However, a closer examination reveals that the reality may be more nuanced. While there may be no open violence, the situation is far from calm and peaceful. The existence of injustices and disputes over land ownership, for instance, creates an atmosphere of tension and unease. The fact that the community does not own the land they inhabit and that the landowners are reluctant to settle there indicates a deep-seated problem that is not being addressed.

"Well, most people living in this area, they don't own land because of historical injustices. The previous regimes brought people outside outside this county and they were allocated land, they were allocated land. And those who were living there, the people who were living there were not involved in the in the division of that land after the colonial, after the white settlers went. But they bring other people from other counties. That one we call it historical injustice." (Peace Ambassador 5)

"Initially this used to be a war zone, this area. Because now it's a fight between the landowners on paper, what they titled it, and those living there. Now those people who are living there, they don't have they don't own the land legally according to the according to government rules and regulations on land. They just settled on people's land according to the papers. And now those who actually legally own the land, fear to come and settle there. Because they fear their lives." (Peace Ambassador 5)

When asked about specific cases he'd dealt with, the peace ambassador recalled a particularly violent incident involving a dispute between herders and farmers that escalated to the point of arrows being used. His matter-of-fact tone, however, belied the gravity of the situation, suggesting that, for him, it was just another ordinary case:

"Recently, there was a conflict between one family around here. The Samburu boys, the herders, came and grazed on somebody's shamba, on somebody's garden. And the war broke out with arrows. With arrows, and people were injured. But we settled that one." (Peace Ambassador 5)

Interestingly, according to a chief of another zone these kinds of violent conflicts are less in his sub-location. Meanwhile he confidently asserted that his region is peaceful, with minimal violence:

"We normally have some minor cases like, you know, petty theft is normal. In some areas, you find a boy stealing a chicken, and somebody stealing a goat, but you don't also have that magnitude. (...) like killing or whatever, we have never had that. But normally, you have some theft, but not those ones of violence. It is that of picking, when the children are grazing at night, then they pick one, two, like that. Or they take about four when you are asleep, but not with violence. We have never had cases of stealing violence. Especially in stock or armed for stock thefts. Armed thieves, we have never had these in our area." (Area Chief 2).

The chief of this area states that cattle rustling has never been a problem in his region, and that the only minor issues they've had to deal with are petty crimes. However, his cavalier tone, exemplified by his

downplaying of a boy stealing a chicken, raises questions about the chief's perspective on violence. Furthermore, it's striking to note that his understanding of violence is limited to physical harm and theft, overlooking the deeper social and cultural complexities at play.

Meanwhile, another chief from a different region expressed a starkly contrasting perspective. He emphasized that his community is actively working towards living in harmony, and that they prioritize peaceful coexistence:

"These people try to be peaceful always. (...) Yes, they are peaceful people. They are trying to be peaceful always. Even in this area of ours, we don't have a police post in this area. The whole sub-location there is no police post. So, they are living all together peacefully." (Area chief 1)

This statement implies that conflicts still exist, even in the absence of police presence. It raises questions about the relationship between law enforcement and conflict. For instance, does a lack of police nearby necessarily lead to a decrease in conflict and crime?

Furthermore, when someone claims to always try to be peaceful, several questions arise. Does this phrase imply that they deliberately make an effort to avoid conflicts or disagreements? Or is it a fundamental attitude or approach to life that guides their actions? Alternatively, might 'trying' suggest that they don't always succeed in achieving peacefulness, but are committed to striving for it? The answer likely lies in a combination of these possibilities. For instance, someone might have a general inclination towards peacefulness, but still find themselves engaging in disagreements from time to time.

Analysing these community descriptions through Galtung's framework reveals a significant lack of positive peace, with community members facing both structural and cultural violence. Key issues identified include:

- **Unemployment and Poverty:** Many individuals struggle with economic hardship and lack access to equitable opportunities.
- **Conflict Between Pastoralists and Farmers:** There is a clash between pastoralists and farmers competing for shared resources, such as water and grazing or planting fields.
- **Cultural Violence:** One culture may dominate another, as evidenced by the unequal distribution of land.

Additionally, another question arises: Were the peace ambassadors emphasizing cultural diversity and harmonious coexistence due to social desirability and the interviewer's background?

5.2. Cases the peace ambassadors attend to

The above-mentioned description of challenges within the community already mirrors the key issues peace ambassadors attend to which are:

1. Conflicts between herders and farmers. Notably, conflicts between herders and farmers are a persistent problem, exacerbated by drought-induced resource scarcity. This issue is ubiquitous across all areas and was particularly severe during times of drought.
2. Domestic violence and challenges between couples: One of the most prominent conflicts is domestic violence. As mentioned above the economic crisis and domestic violence seems to be related to each other.
3. Peace ambassadors also deal with cases of child marriage, defilement, female genital mutilation, and other illegal practices that are brought before the courts.

In addition to addressing conflicts, peace ambassadors see their role as educational and informative. They provide information on human rights and engage in sensitization efforts to promote a culture of peace and

understanding. By addressing these challenges and promoting awareness, they work towards creating a more harmonious and just community.

In summary, peace ambassadors navigate a diverse array of situations, demonstrating that their field of influence extends further than the researcher initially anticipated. Their multifaceted roles allow them to engage with various contexts and challenges, highlighting the broader impact they have on promoting peace and resolving conflicts.

5.3. Who are the peace ambassadors and what motivates them to be peace ambassadors?

The peace ambassadors interviewed are respected leaders within their communities, often referred to as 'natural leaders.' Many of them hold leadership positions within multiple community groups, demonstrating their strong influence and connection with their communities.

"Before that I was a community health worker, which was (.) which is now called community health promoter. I've been dealing with children, even the community, the vulnerable, even the elderly." (Peace Ambassador 3)

Their exceptional leadership skills are a defining characteristic, and a strong spiritual conviction underscores their role. Many believe that their talent is God-given, and they see themselves as vessels for serving their community."

"You know, everything is a talent. It's a gift from God. And not everybody, not everybody has the qualities or characters of a peace ambassador. It's God who appoints leaders. So, it's God who defines the character of a person. And people see you. When they see you, they see you have something in you." (Peace Ambassador 5)

Another peace ambassador stated that the leadership comes from the heart, they describe it as a calling from their heart:

"And I enjoyed this work because I hear it is a calling from my heart. I love to help people. I love peace. I love to solve difficulties in our area. (...) Before I joined this team, peace ambassador, inside my heart, I love to help people, to do good, to help people. Where I meet conflict, I try to solve." (Peace Ambassador 6)

All interviewed peace ambassadors are very passionate about being a peace ambassador and serving the community.

"And also, it must come out from the heart to be a Peace Ambassador. Because they are not paid So it has to be voluntarily. Out of the heart to become a Peace Ambassador." (Peace Ambassador 4)

"So, if you are not passionate, on matters of community, I think that will be very hard for you to, to conduct yourself as a peace ambassador. But if you are passionate, and you are able to sacrifice, because you cannot, you cannot fight what you love doing the most." (Peace Ambassador 1)

What sets the peace ambassadors apart is their exceptional leadership skills and a profound inner calling to harness these abilities for the greater good of their community. This inner drive is their primary motivation for this work, and they find personal fulfilment when they can contribute to resolving community issues. Many express a shared vision of creating a community where conflicts are minimal, and harmony prevail.

"Well, my personal feeling, I can say that I am very happy. It gives me that ah, ah you know assurance of a better community, better peaceful community, in the sense that I am also part and parcel of that

community, you know it is not a matter of what, of who is going to come and make probably my community to be safe. It gives me a lot of satisfaction, joy, that I am part and parcel of the problem solving towards making the community be peaceful.” (Peace Ambassador 1)

The wish to have the ability and the health for serving the community can be very deep.

“And surely let me say. In this work I am asking God to help me. Sometimes I get sick. I admit myself. I am sick. I have a problem. But I am told God to give me courage and to heal me. So that I can continue in that serving community.” (Peace Ambassador 6)

When asked about their advice for someone seeking to become a peace ambassador, they emphasize the importance of volunteering and self-sacrifice. They stress that being a peace ambassador is not a paid profession, but rather a calling that requires unwavering commitment and availability. They must be prepared to put aside personal interests and dedicate themselves fully to the role, always ready to respond to emerging situations that demand their attention.

“This is a job that you can be called, from the weird hours of the night. This is a job, a crisis can, you know, a crisis that can't send an alarm, or give you a prior notice, so that you can act on it. It is something that comes immediately, and your approach to it matters a lot.” (Peace Ambassador 1)

“Because somebody is leaving his work, he is leaving his work, he comes to listen to what somebody else is complaining and try to solve and he is not even leaving his work only one day. He can forego his work for even two days, trying to solve some problems without any payment.” (Area Chief 1)

“And the others who are quick in reacting, reacting to a scenario or anything that has cropped up. And again, others have, their eyes are wide and ears. So, the village they represent is in their fingertips. So, they know everything, and they are very quick in resolving and delegating.” (chief 2).

A peace ambassador should be a vigilant individual who is well-versed in the intricacies of their community, staying informed about local issues. They should be vigilant to things happening around them. They should be able to respond promptly to emerging conflicts or crises, acting swiftly and effectively to prevent escalation and promote reconciliation.

“So I think, for me, being a peace ambassador entails a lot of you know, knowledge, you know ehm creativity, being assertive, knowing where the gaps are, and trying to fill to fill it in such a way that it will positively impact the lives of those people around you.” (Peace Ambassador 1)

Despite their humble economic circumstances, peace ambassadors are ordinary community members who live off the land, farming small plots and tending to animals. What sets them apart is not their background or occupation, but their commitment to serving as mediators and facilitators. In fact, their lack of formal employment actually frees them up to devote more time and energy to their peacebuilding work.

“I don't have a formal employment. Myself, I am ah I do farming, mixed farming. I have a few animals. And also, I have a small shamba. So, in most cases, I'm just around here. So, that's why I decided to, instead of just staying idle, I can move and settle issues.” (Peace Ambassador 5)

One interviewee is mentioning two things which qualifies him especially for this job as peace ambassador. One is that he travelled when he was younger and got an understanding of the diverse cultures:

“And those people who have travelled, who have stayed with different...Eh, eh eh, you know, Kenya is a diverse nation. So, if you have moved and mingled with different tribes moved and mingled with different tribes, then that means you're experienced. You understand the cultural practices of every community around here. So, it's easier.” (Peace Ambassador 5)

This was not mentioned by other interviewees. However, it was highlighted that it is important for them to have exposure visits and exchange with peace ambassadors from other areas. The other thing the peace ambassador mentioned is that he has more knowledge, has the skill of acquiring more knowledge and want to share the knowledge he has:

“To assist those people who are not aware of their rights. Maybe myself, I've gone to school at a certain level, although I've not gone far, because of financial. (...) The little I know; I like to share with them.” (Peace Ambassador 5)

Alongside their commitment to peacebuilding, peace ambassadors share a common trait: a desire to disseminate their knowledge and experiences. However, it is noteworthy that most of them have not pursued extensive formal education. Instead, their strengths lie in their ability to understand concepts, communicate effectively, and impart their knowledge to others. Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned that communication skills are essential when dealing with conflicts. However, it is evident that one key competency is communication skills. Perhaps they do not mention it because these skills come naturally to them.

Furthermore, several key qualities are often considered essential for effective peace ambassadors, including being in harmony with their own family and neighbours, as well as possessing inner peace. These qualities enable them to approach conflicts with empathy and understanding.

“One thing. First. Your home has to be in peace. And in a good family. You have to have peace inside” (Peace Ambassador 6)

In addition to sharing their knowledge and being in harmony with their community, peace ambassadors must also possess emotional intelligence and mental stability. This enables them to remain calm and composed in the face of conflict, allowing them to approach disputes with a clear head and a willingness to listen.

“There is also mental mental health, like also, we people who work as community peace ambassadors, we are also human beings, and we are also vulnerable to emotions at times, so we also need to have the issue emotional emotional control, training on emotions, how to handle your emotions too, so that when you go and mitigate a certain issue, you don't end up escalating the crisis any further.” (Peace Ambassador 1)

One peace ambassador answered to the question what advice they would give to someone who wants to be a peace ambassador:

“Also, we told them there is what is called discipline and self-control. If you are someone who is disciplined, self-control, you can join (to be a) peace ambassador.” (Peace Ambassador 6)

Another peace ambassador is stating how she approaches when she meets people in conflict:

“But sometimes when dealing with some of these issues These issues, she first calms down and goes to them and talks to them both relaxed, with peace at heart.” (Peace Ambassador 4 translated)”

This leads us to the next question on how peace ambassadors handle cases.

5.4. How do peace ambassadors handle cases?

The role of a peace ambassador when arriving at a conflict scene is to de-escalate the situation and bring the opposing parties together. However, this task is not always easy. One peace ambassador shared that, at times, she has to temporarily withdraw from the scene until tensions calm down. This challenge underscores the reason why they often work in teams.

“She is saying that it is not easy. Some of her challenges are that the parties are not willing to accept their mistakes. And they can end up hating you. They hate you because they see you as nothing. You have come to do nothing in their conflicts. And again, they can even end up beating you. Because they want to continue their own fights. You are interrupting them. So, it is not easy.” (Peace Ambassador 2 translated)

After calming the situation, the next step is to listen to both parties involved. Therefore, peace ambassadors must possess strong listening skills.

“Peace ambassadors should be people who are good listeners. First of all, to listen, listen to what people say. They should listen. You know, that one now, listening to what somebody is saying, a complainant is given. It is very important for you to know how to solve the problem.” (Area Chief 1)

They first patiently listen to both sides; they try to be neutral. After that they help the parties to resolve their conflict. According to the chief a key competency of being a peace ambassador is that they should also be able to solve problems. Here he is in line with other peace ambassadors who state that the peace ambassador has to be focussed and good in problem solving. This also hints at how they resolve the conflicts:

“Whenever there is a problem somewhere they do contact me, I go visit the household, I counsel them, and I always leave that place, when there is a completion of every con . problem, and they always do appreciate.” (Peace Ambassador 3)

It appears that the term counselling and advising in conflict resolution is understood to involve a process of active listening, where one first seeks to understand the nature of the problem before offering a solution. This approach aligns with statements that expects the peace ambassador to be focused and able to make informed decisions. Notably, one peace ambassador has extended this role to her own family:

“Whenever there is something, even my elder sister does consult me, so I am the final person to decide on what or have the decision on the problem that should be solved.” (Peace Ambassador 3)

the peace ambassadors describe the process of first calming the situation down, then listen to them in a comparable way:

“She talks to both parties; she asks the other party what was the mistake. And also she asks the other party what was the mistake. They come together, if the mistake was on this party, she tells the other party to ask for forgiveness. Then she reunites them. When they refuse to agree, she tells them to go forward, to move ahead, maybe to the police station. Sometimes, during those conflicts, or during solving, sometimes she manage to make them understand. And then they are able to calm down. At some point, they come up with an understanding. They then listen, then they are able to solve the issue.” (Peace Ambassador 2, translated).

After listening to each party, peace ambassadors strive to convey the value of peaceful conflict resolution to both sides. By doing so, they aim to create a sense of mutual understanding and encourage parties to work towards a peaceful resolution.

"We show them that fighting is not a is not a solution to a conflict. It's good to settle cases amicably (...) we talk to them. Yes, we find an agreement. (...) When they agree, we tell the owner of the animals to compensate. So, we tell, we advise the pastoralists." (Peace Ambassador 5)

The interviewees responses show that after listening to the problem they try to convince the parties. It seems that peace ambassadors in some instances are not neutral anymore. They make the grazers understand that they were wrong. For them it is important that the grazers understand.

"When we meet two people's fighting, we call them there. "See, this is a shamba for someone, (...) Yes, we talk to farmer and also to the grazer. When we come, there is peace Yes, when we talk to them, there is peace. And they forgive each other." (Peace Ambassador 4)

Sometimes they have to talk a lot until they convince them. At the end of the conflict, they should forgive each other.

The analysis of the interviews reveals that most disputes between herders and farmers are resolved through a simple yet effective approach: The perpetrator agrees to compensate for the damages. In contrast, cases of domestic violence or marital problems are typically addressed by emphasizing the importance of harmony within the relationship. The peace ambassadors' collaborative approach is noteworthy, as they often work in teams to provide mutual support. Interestingly, one young man felt constrained in offering advice to married couples due to his own unmarried status. To overcome this limitation, he sought the guidance of a respected village elder

"For example, on a particular day, my neighbour, they had this domestic, you know gender-based violence. And we have been told also that, as a topic in St. Martin, during our teachings, community teachings, that women. women normally face this gender-based violence, especially in marriages. And previously, I was not capacity-built on how to deal with a married couple. Because by that time I wasn't married, I was just living alone." (Peace Ambassador 1)

This statement highlights the positive impact of the St. Martin training on the peace ambassadors. Notably, they have become more proactive in addressing domestic violence cases, demonstrating a significant shift in their approach. Moreover, this example illustrates an important lesson: that experience, and credibility are crucial when offering guidance. In this instance, the peace ambassador recognized the importance of seeking the wisdom of a village elder, who was better equipped to advise a married couple.

"So I went, I called him, I asked him, we cannot allow that particular neighbour to continue physically assaulting the lady. The lady is vulnerable, she was still breastfeeding, she has a small child. We need to intervene."

They went together to the couple and try to understand the conflict and give guidance:

"And we called them both aside. We heard the story part of the husband, then we also had the story part of the lady, and we were able to contrast, compare notes, and try to give some you know directions, or some help, some guidance." (Peace Ambassador 1)

The advice they were given is that *“they shouldn't escalate the conflict higher, because it will cause them more conflicts, and they will regret later, which they were able to buy the advice. And since then, they have been staying happily.”* (Peace Ambassador 1)

In summary, the peace ambassadors employ a four-step approach to address conflicts in the community. Firstly, they intervene by calming the situation and gathering information by speaking separately with both parties involved. Next, they emphasize the importance of resolving conflicts amicably and peaceful coexistence. The third step involves persuading both parties to reach a mutually beneficial agreement, often by taking sides in disputes, such as requiring the responsible party to compensate for damages. In cases of domestic violence, they focus on promoting harmonious relationships. The last step is to help both parties acknowledge their mistakes and understand how they can learn from them.

The goal is ultimately to foster forgiveness, with the offending party taking responsibility for their actions, as seen in cases where herders must ask for forgiveness.

What's intriguing is that the peace ambassadors often take sides, unlike traditional mediators, and provide guidance on the path forward. This requires them to possess strong problem-solving and decision-making skills. It appears that the peace ambassadors have evolved into a moral authority within the community, rather than being mediators or counsellors. Their unique approach stems from their embeddedness within the community, allowing them to address conflicts in a culturally sensitive and effective manner.

5.5. Chiefs and peace ambassadors

According to the chiefs interviewed, peace ambassadors play a crucial role in maintaining peace in the area. They are the ones who know the community best, having a deep understanding of the neighbourhood. As one chief noted, they have the community “at their fingertips” and keep their “eyes and ears open.” This proximity to the community allows them to effectively address conflicts before they escalate.

*“So, you know, tribal clashes come from a very small incident. When maybe a child may be fighting another child of another tribe. And the other person, maybe without a good understanding, he comes to the other opponent in a rough way or angry to fight another person. So, in that case, something can erupt because when two people fight one another and they are of different tribes, on the other side, the others will try to help the person of their tribe. And the others will again come in trying to fight the other person. So, without these peace ambassadors again, who can now come in and **control the situation**. come in and control the situation.”* (Area Chief 1)

The peace ambassadors' diverse ethnic backgrounds, which mirror those of the community, are a significant advantage. This diversity allows them to understand and relate to the community's concerns, making them effective mediators in calming down tense situations. Moreover, their familiarity with the community is a major strength, as they are able to tap into their knowledge and connections to address conflicts.

“We normally do it with peace ambassadors, because the most, the inner call, the getting permission, is these peace ambassadors, they are very important, because the area is vast, it's large. And without them, the job can be very difficult, and some hinderance here and there. But because they are on the ground, these were elders, the peace ambassadors, like the ones we have here, they are better placed to identify, any fights that may crop up in their areas of jurisdiction.” (Area Chief 2)

The peace ambassadors see their autonomy from government institutions as a major advantage. Unlike the adversarial approach taken by the police and courts, their approach prioritizes dialogue and understanding, leading to more peaceful outcomes. Moreover, when conflicts are resolved through official channels, such as the police and courts, the parties involved often emerge with feelings of resentment and hostility.

“Some of these problems cannot be solved by the government alone. Again, they also need a friendly approach. You see, if I probably get into a conflict with my neighbour, and I, we, we we get to a place, probably we graduate into a physical assault, or fighting. Ahm, the government is not very friendly as compared to Peace Ambassador, because now they will deal with the legal, the legal framework. So, you see, I will come and get arrested, or both, both of us will be arrested and maybe prosecuted before a court of law. And that will also continue making people to be enemies, even after the court intervenes.” (Peace Ambassador 1)

In contrast, the peace ambassadors' approach focuses on calming the situation and finding a mutually acceptable agreement between the parties. As one peace ambassador notes, this approach often yields a "win-win" outcome. Moreover, this method is not only more peaceful, but also significantly faster than other conflict resolution methods.

“They (the community) think the Peace Ambassadors are doing a good job, because they resolve some of these issues even without involving a court. And it's kind of It's a more efficient. And more faster way. To resolve some of the issues and some of the conflicts within the community without involving the court.” (Peace Ambassador 4)

The peace ambassadors' approach not only resolves conflicts more quickly and peacefully, but also prioritizes privacy.

When cases come up in the community the first person who is contacted is the peace ambassador. The peace ambassadors then see if they can handle the cases by themselves:

“When a case arouses in our village, the first person to be contacted is a peace ambassador. This and this have happened. The peace ambassador, like myself, if I've been called and briefed on that information, I know if you can call elders or it's a police case. Or you go to the chief. We work also closely with the administration. With the chief. Actually, we work closely.

“So those cases, like child abuse, child rights, gender equality, and diagnosing of such things, which are within their control, within their control, they normally do it (...) But for those things that need intervention of the government, (...) we normally tell them, you just inform us, then with your assistance.” (Area chief 2)

According to the peace ambassadors they hand over the cases of criminal offence to the government structures through the chief. Such offences are also cases of child abuse, defilement, early marriages. In addition, when cases can't be calmed down they involve the police as mentioned already above.

“Just to reconcile, to reconcile and settle those cases which are out of court, but the serious cases we forward to the court.” (Peace Ambassador 5)

“The recent case was a case involving a schoolgirl aged 15 years with a boy. Okay the case has been, the policeman told us it's defilement, but the case has been forwarded and we left that one for the court. This was a recent case we had. Those cases are very common here. Also, marriages, also, we have female genital mutilation, but also that one has been left to the government. We only give out information

on what's happening because it has been declined by the government as a crime. It's a crime against humanity." (Peace Ambassador 5)

A key takeaway is that peace ambassadors and chiefs collaborate closely, with the chiefs sometimes viewing the peace ambassadors as trusted extensions of themselves. However, this dynamic is more nuanced than a simple extension of authority, as the peace ambassadors play a crucial role in facilitating communication between the chief and the community. One chief explicitly emphasized that the presence of peace ambassadors and village elders has been instrumental in preventing conflicts from escalating. The chiefs have come to rely on the peace ambassadors' expertise and discretion and have given them significant autonomy to negotiate and resolve conflicts.

6. Summary and discussion

The findings from this study emphasize the pivotal roles played by peace ambassadors from St. Martin CSA in conflict resolution across their communities in Laikipia West, Kenya. These individuals, sharing similar socioeconomic backgrounds with their neighbours, differentiate themselves through their outstanding leadership qualities and unwavering commitment to fostering social harmony.

Collaborating closely with local chiefs, peace ambassadors leverage their standing within the community and cultural insights to mediate disputes, particularly between pastoralists and farmers and between married couples. Their conflict intervention emphasizes principles of forgiveness, mutual understanding, and amicable resolutions. Unlike professional mediators, peace ambassadors adopt a proactive and directive approach, actively calming conflict situations and persuading disputants toward reconciliation. This model deviates from the more neutral stance typically embraced by mediators, who prioritize facilitating open dialogues and allowing parties to navigate their own solutions.

The approach utilized by peace ambassadors appears to draw significantly from traditional methods of conflict resolution. Traditional conflict resolution systems have long relied on community-based practices that emphasize collective involvement and dialogue, often incorporating cultural norms and values. As highlighted by Pkalya et al. (2004), "Conflicting parties are more likely to accept guidance from these mediators than from other sources because an elder's decision does not entail any loss of face and is backed by social pressure."

This principle is crucial in the peace ambassador model, where the aim is to facilitate understanding and restoration rather than to create divisions. The focus is on forgiveness and reconciliation, which serves to prevent further conflict and fosters a sense of unity among participants. As the peace ambassadors articulate, viewing conflicting parties as potential allies rather than enemies is essential. This contrasts sharply with adversarial resolutions, such as those pursued in court systems, which can entrench hostility and divide communities. Kariuki (2014) further underscores the importance of this approach, noting that "conflict resolution aimed at restoring social harmony, mending breached social ties, performance of rituals, and offering apologies or compensation to ensure that the status quo before the dispute is restored."

Oduma-Abooh et al. emphasize on the importance of focusing on indigenous methods of conflict resolution, arguing that Western strategies have often proven ineffective in African contexts. They contend that these external frameworks may not adequately address the unique cultural, social, and historical realities that shape conflicts within local communities. By advocating for the reinstitutionalization of traditional conflict resolution practices, the authors highlight the potential benefits of localized approaches that are better aligned with the values and experiences of the affected populations (Oduma-Abooh et al., 2018)

The employment of peace ambassadors and village elders in the Kenyan context presents a rich opportunity for conflict resolution, particularly when considering the contemporary challenges that arise in a rapidly evolving society. The collaborative effort between these traditional figures and public government institutions illustrates a nuanced approach where cultural integrity is maintained while also adhering to established legal frameworks. The concept of integrating traditional and contemporary approaches to conflict resolution is indeed promising and warrants further exploration. Such a hybrid model could harness the community-centric nature of traditional methods while also incorporating the structured processes and legal authority of contemporary systems. By leveraging the strengths of both systems, it can potentially address the underlying issues that lead to conflict while ensuring accountability and justice in more severe cases.

In summary, the potential for a hybrid model of conflict resolution in Kenya lies not only in combining traditional and modern mechanisms but also in ensuring that the process is deeply rooted in the lived experiences of the community. Continued exploration and research in this area could lead to innovative solutions that honour cultural practices while adapting to contemporary challenges, fostering a more effective and just approach to conflict resolution. Multidisciplinary research could play a crucial role in unpacking the complexities surrounding conflict resolution mechanisms. By bringing together insights from anthropology, linguistics, sociology, law, and peace studies, researchers can gather a more nuanced understanding of how traditional and contemporary systems can be harmonized.

The role of peace ambassadors extends beyond mediating disputes; they also engage in community sensitization on critical social issues, such as gender-based violence and children's rights. The training programs conducted by St. Martin are vital in empowering these ambassadors, equipping them with necessary skills for effective intervention. Nonetheless, the study captures the pervasive structural violence faced by community members, such as unemployment and competition for resources, which underscores the need for addressing these systemic issues to achieve positive peace.

This research does not delve deeply into the question of volunteerism versus professionalism. The findings indicate that volunteers play a crucial role due to their connection with the community and therefore cannot be replaced by professional mediators. Despite this strength, there are limitations when it comes to managing severe conflicts, which are then referred to local authorities or the courts. A significant consideration is whether there is a need to employ professional mediators to address cases before they escalate into police or court matters. Local chiefs may not be equipped to handle such situations, as they are typically not trained as professional mediators. Therefore, the potential for effective resolution in severe cases may lie in the collaboration between professional and volunteer mediators. These dynamic warrants further exploration in future studies.

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