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# Engaging with local communities to prevent violence: what role for ICTs?

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## Engaging with local communities to prevent violence: what role for ICTs?

The peacebuilding field is full of examples of inappropriate technology that failed to live up to expectations. Effective conflict early warning and prevention approaches depend on building and strengthening relationships. This research – carried out in South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda – shows that, at best, information and communications technologies (ICTs) can support relationship building, but that they are not a substitute for the human element that is essential to creating trust, dialogue and shared goals.

### Starting point: assumptions about communication in effective early warning for conflict prevention

In many societies affected by violent conflict, the authorities and armed forces frequently only respond after the violence has surpassed critical levels. Early warning aims to reduce the destructive effects of violence and increase opportunities for conflicting parties to engage constructively. Local community members can play a vital role, as they often have a grounded understanding of conflict dynamics and can mobilise their strong networks and relationships. But they also regularly suffer from marginalisation, have weak access to political decision-makers and security forces, lack the capacity to respond effectively, or have little knowledge of technical tools and methods.

Local civil society organisations (CSOs) are often close to grassroots events and citizen voices, keenly aware of escalating tensions, and able to monitor conflict tensions and ‘tipping points’. They may have capacities and wider networks that community members lack. This means that they can be well situated to respond quickly and transform conflict dynamics into opportunities for positive change, by building relationships and enabling communications between conflicting parties and authorities.

Conversely, the security forces – sometimes necessary for containing violence and reducing destruction – and local authorities, which have the capacity to respond effectively, seldom benefit from locally sourced early warning intelligence.

Based on these assumptions, this research set out to assess the effectiveness of the role of communication tools – including ICTs – in connecting ‘warners’ (local organised community members) to ‘responders’ (local authorities and decision-makers) and creating opportunities to build trust and support relationships that allow this to happen. This research briefing presents some of the insights that emerged.

### Applied research for problem-solving with local partners

This applied research was coordinated by the ACTION Support Centre (ASC), the Africa regional hub of a network of organisations



**Table 1. Research partners and the background of local conflict**

<p><b>Gauteng, South Africa</b></p> <p>Gauteng Local Peace Committees (GLPCs) address local and community-specific challenges in the deprived townships of Alexandra, Orange Farm and Soweto, all near Johannesburg, as well as the national, continental and regional issues that are affecting residents. By working with local community leaders, the local media, churches and other stakeholders, the GLPCs create incentive programmes for local South Africans to forge partnerships with skilled foreigners in the development of productive ventures.</p>	<p>All three townships have high levels of unemployment, poverty and crime. Access to basic services – particularly housing, electricity and water – is very limited, and this has led to service-delivery protests that have sometimes become violent. All three communities have also been marked by ‘xenophobic’ violence, particularly the looting of shops owned by non-South African nationals. There are high levels of mistrust between community members and the police force.</p>
<p><b>Zanzibar, Tanzania</b></p> <p>The Zanzibar Interfaith Centre (ZANZIC) actively supports interfaith peacebuilding through uniting religious leaders in a joint committee, which in turn supports 300 local peace committees. It has also established a study centre and hosts youth clubs for drama and football. It is affiliated to the Lutheran Church in Tanzania.</p>	<p>Conflict around religion and politics has periodically erupted into violence in Zanzibar, particularly during election periods when the island’s majority Muslim population tends to identify with the national opposition party. Post-election violence stemmed from conflict over vote-rigging and lack of transparency after the 2000 and 2005 elections. There have also been violent attacks on both Muslim and Christian clerics, and there are concerns about the potential for the spread of future violence.</p>
<p><b>Gulu, Uganda</b></p> <p>People’s Voices for Peace (PVP) has been a sustained voice for peace in northern Uganda. Its activities include facilitating the community reintegration of children formerly abducted by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), advocacy for a peaceful resolution to the LRA conflict, and supporting the representation of local grassroots perspectives and women’s voices in the search for peace in northern Uganda. It achieves its aims through training, lobbying, meetings, field visits, peace marches and community mobilisation.</p>	<p>The long-running conflict between the LRA and the Government of Uganda is the backdrop to PVP’s work in Gulu. There is also a historic ethnic tension between the Acholi of northern Uganda and the government. More recently, government land-grabbing from local people without consultation has led to mass community protests and violent responses by government forces. An influx of refugees from South Sudan, unemployment, poverty, discrimination and the marginalisation of child mothers and young returnees also pose a major threat to post-conflict recovery.</p>

and individuals committed to transforming conflict. It brought together four project partners: three African CSOs working on conflict resolution in South Africa, Uganda and Tanzania (see Table 1), and a team of UK-based researchers from the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations at Coventry University.

Over 18 months, the project engaged with the GLPCs, ZANZIC and PVP – together with several of their own CSO partners – in a research process that explored their contexts and communities. There were two site visits to each area, and sustained interaction between partners throughout the whole period. The researchers and practitioners

worked together in a community of practice, using tools for conflict analysis to learn about the dynamics affecting communication and cooperative responses to conflict and violence in Gauteng, northern Uganda and Zanzibar.

The research used participatory methodologies and was an interactive enquiry that was practical and problem-solving in nature. It created opportunities and spaces in which to establish or strengthen relationships between the research partners and those with the capacity to respond or amplify their concerns – from local government, to police and security services, to CSOs.

As part of its participatory process, the research asked questions about the nature of existing relationships, and the patterns of power and trust within them. These relationships – whether strong, weak or broken – largely depend on communication. So the research also asked:

- Who communicates with whom within early warning networks?
- Which tools are used to communicate?
- What is the content and nature of the communication?
- What are the hindrances and enablers to clearer communication?
- How do people communicate with those perceived to hold power?
- What are the opportunities afforded by current technological infrastructure?

Building on these questions, the research supported partners to explore the complex relational webs between stakeholders in each context, in an effort to gain deeper insights into the nature of citizen engagement and

the way that different stakeholders respond to perceived conflicts and the escalation of tensions.

### **Communication gaps: part of the pattern of conflict**

The researchers documented several conflict scenarios in their communities where a lack of communication was part of a dynamic of rising tension. In Uganda, for example, PVP activists reported their concerns about rising tensions between local residents and South Sudanese migrants and refugees, but noted that these had gone largely unnoticed by those in authority, who may be able to support PVP in its attempts to analyse, understand and defuse the tensions.

In a research interview in Zanzibar, a respondent from the local office of an international peacebuilding organisation described a scenario where houses in a particular area had been demolished by the government because they were located in a ‘water reserve’. Although the government had allocated other land for people whose homes stood in the reserve, and had been in communication about this with the *shehia* (the local government representative), the demolitions came as a complete shock – even to the *shehia* himself, who did not realise that his home would be destroyed. This communication gap was made worse by an antiquated set of legal provisions, which even educated local people were unable to access and understand.

Both these examples illustrate a lack of communication between community members and local authorities, but another example from Zanzibar illustrates how other actors can also be involved in communication gaps. In a research

interview, respondents from a think tank discussed their efforts to establish a phone survey designed to ask local people's opinions on economic, social and political issues on a monthly basis. The objective of this survey was to provide its funders – a consortium of foreign embassies – with insights into the perceptions of local people. Although the survey ultimately delivered locally relevant findings – recording, for example, an unexpectedly high rate of satisfaction with police competence – these findings were not published, and the process had no direct, formal link with the Zanzibar authorities. This represents a missed opportunity and illustrates how actors working for the same goals at different levels can sometimes be disconnected, with opportunities for communication missed.

### **ICTs or other communication tools? It depends on context**

In Gulu, ICTs are often used to arrange rather than conduct communication. Mobile phones are used in northern Uganda, but typically for short message service (SMS) messages rather than conversations. SMS messages are often used to arrange face-to-face meetings – especially if the matter for discussion is of any importance.

For effective communication in the community, radio is still the most prominent and accessible medium in Gulu: it is a clearing house for information and the most important platform for civic engagement. Through radio, people join in discussions and debates about community issues. Radio programmes also record and air conversations held in communities, reflecting their concerns. Local leaders found it easy to engage with community members about the land question via radio. For rural

communities, which do not have a strongly established culture of writing and reading, meetings, video shows, role plays, discussion and *wang'oo* – traditional discussions around the fire – remain the most important methods of communication, learning and spreading messages about peacebuilding.

In Zanzibar, a brief survey during a project workshop showed a contrasting picture from that in Gulu. Among the 32 respondents, the four most commonly used communication tools were mobile phones, televisions, SMS and radio, which most people used several times a day. SMS and WhatsApp were the most frequently used ICT applications, but although people were enthusiastic about the potential use of ICT tools for peacebuilding, they were also aware of the limitations imposed by weak internet access, low smartphone penetration and costs – all of which could limit access for poorer people. But despite the high awareness of ICTs among this group, they also discussed the importance of public noticeboards, leaflets and flyers as methods of communication that have been very influential in escalating political tensions, and pointed out that these 'low tech' means are equally important when considering appropriate responses for preventing violence.

In Gauteng, the City of Johannesburg hosted a workshop which brought together representatives from the GLPCs with city staff from the departments of community safety and social development, at which the best opportunities for effective communication between conflict stakeholders were identified. The conversation began with a discussion of ICTs, but quickly shifted away from technological forms of communication towards approaches that foster collective

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action, such as awareness campaigns, protests, seminars, dialogues, petitions and community help desks. Social media was included on this list, but as supporting, rather than a primary, method of communication.

These snapshots show a very different mixture of, and balance between, ICT and non-ICT communication methods in the three research locations. They illustrate a fundamental point about the potential use of ICTs to prevent mitigate violent conflict, which is the importance of understanding the technologies – both low and high tech – that are already being used in any given context. The partners in this research concluded that, where possible, it is always best to work to improve relationships between conflict stakeholders before introducing or even discussing ICT innovations.

### **Trust is the most important ingredient**

As GLPC members explained during a project workshop, weaknesses in communication are not the result of either the lack of, or the presence of, cutting-edge technologies; they are about relationships between people. What is needed, they argued, are location-appropriate methods that can build on existing communication channels and strengthen trust between the people communicating. Efforts to build trust can also allow externally introduced methods to be applied effectively in specific contexts. Several examples from across the research illustrate these points.

- In Zanzibar, when the think tank discussed above set out to establish its mobile-based survey – which asks about politics, the economy, government and transparency – enthusiasm was initially low. Even though the survey team entered the community only after meeting the *shehia*, potential respondents were very suspicious about why they were being given free phones, and even simple questions like ‘how many children do you have’ provoked real alarm. But after a series of village-level meetings, organised through a local partner, and repeated face-to-face engagements, confidence and trust were established to the point that full participation in the survey was secured.
- In Gauteng, during an outbreak of xenophobic violence in 2015, members of Diepkloof LPC used WhatsApp as a useful, cheap tech tool to mobilise members of their existing networks of trust in the community to counter mobs of youths intent on looting shops owned by foreigners. Word of mouth was also important, as activists went from door to door. They were able to trigger the formation of barricades that prevented mobs from accessing the streets where the shops were located.
- In Gulu, tensions around the government’s appropriation of traditional Acholi hunting grounds were rising quickly during 2015. An established communication channel, the Acholi Sub-region’s Leadership Forum – which includes representatives of both central and local government, tribal

leaders, and CSOs – met twice in May 2015 to respond to these tensions. During this period, local people used SMS to update their own trusted leaders, who were sitting on the forum, about land disputes. This was one contribution that enabled a fruitful engagement between policy-makers and local leaders, resulting in a response that addressed the issues at hand, instead of sparking off violence.

- In Zanzibar, during Ramadan in 2012, a group of Christians travelled door to door in a Muslim community, evangelising. Tensions rose. A community member phoned the office of the mufti (an Islamic scholar), cautioning that people in the community were preparing to throw stones. The mufti asked them to wait. He phoned church leaders, who in turn phoned their local congregations: none knew of any door-to-door evangelists from their own communities. They went to investigate and found a group of students who had travelled from Dar es Salaam. The local clergy informed them that their actions were insensitive, disrespectful and harmful to the local community and the delicate peace in Zanzibar. The evangelists left and the local clergy apologised to the community for the insensitivity. Not a single stone was thrown.
- In Gauteng, local police are often viewed as part of the problem in terms of violent conflict, rather than the solution. In the belief that stronger relationships between stakeholders are key to peacebuilding, the GLPCs in Alexandra and Diepkloof took deliberate action to build bridges and trust with their local community policing forums. But two different approaches were needed. In Alexandra, approaches were made via

senior officers, who then helped the LPC connect with police officers at the local level; in Diepkloof, including the police directly in the peace committee structure was a more useful strategy. The police responded to these initiatives by placing posters and banners in police stations to remind officers to create positive changes in the way they work and relate to the general public.

- In Zanzibar, the Youth Interfaith Forum of Zanzibar used two very different methods to communicate their messages about violence and coexistence to young people: videos and sport. In the run-up to the 2015 elections, members first made a short film about the role of youths as perpetrators of electoral violence, encouraging young people not to be misused by candidates for their own political ends. After a training workshop, they reflected on this and made a second film that encouraged youths to have an agenda for the election, and to communicate that agenda to the politicians. In the meantime, they were also very proud that their football kit carried a message of peace, which they believed made people support them, even though they were not one of the best teams. A great strength of this mixture of digital and analogue communication tools was that they were appropriate to the intended audience.

These varied examples illustrate the insight that trust within existing anti-conflict social networks and context-appropriate methods are the common factor in successful efforts to mitigate violence and build peace.

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### Revisiting our assumptions: 'preventing violence' instead of 'early warning'

This research was based on the assumptions that:

- a communications gap exists between communities, local authorities and decision-makers, which is a barrier to effective early warning of conflict
- understanding the nature of this gap increases the potential for closing it, and preventing conflict becoming violent
- the multi-stakeholder response required for effective early warnings for conflict prevention requires technical capabilities that still need improvements and further support.

Through interactions with partners and their networks – including interviews, meetings, workshops and training activities – the research found that local people often do not clearly distinguish different phases of responding to conflict, and that the labels and frameworks with which we designed the research project were not adequate or inclusive enough to capture the realities of what they understand and believe about conflict.

It became evident during the fieldwork that the narrow framing of early warning did not account for, or get to the heart of, the kinds of violence that affect people in their day-to-day lives. These include structural violence, “the violence of socially unjust structures which have impacts on survival, wellbeing, identity and freedom”.<sup>1</sup>

Conflict prevention was also not a term that resonated well with community understandings of conflict or the approaches that they use to transforming it, and reflections on the roles of technology were far less meaningful than reflections on the nature of power in relationships. Instead, research partners viewed the whole process of conflict early warning and response through a framework that emphasised how different actors communicated and coordinated, how they trusted each other, and how they were networked. Relationships can be thought of as a muscle which can be trained to deal with the stress and strain of escalating tensions and violence; although phones may be able to facilitate communication, they do not build relationships.

These insights are valuable and, as a result, during the course of the research the team shifted its focus from 'early warning' to

<sup>1</sup> Galtung, J. (1969) 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research* 6.3: 167–91, p.170



'preventing violence'. The team also gave greater emphasis to its existing focus on relationships, working with communities to map the ways that power is balanced and used. These shifts frame the findings and recommendations with which we conclude this research briefing.

## ICTs: useful tools, but no substitute for trust and dialogue

In summary, this research found that:

- Conflict is not a problem that is solved by finding the correct solution; it is a complex and messy social phenomenon, embedded in wider systems of inequality, grievance and power dynamics.
- Conflict is inevitable in human societies, but violent conflict can be mitigated and reduced.
- ICTs such as mobile phones, social media or blogs are tools, not approaches. Their potential for mitigating and reducing violent conflict is greatest where there are existing channels of communication and good inter-organisational and inter-personal trust.
- High costs and low literacy levels mean that ICTs are out of reach for many people in the places where we worked. Simple, low-cost communication tools – banners, posters, flyers and blackboards – can have significant impacts, promoting messages to diffuse conflict tensions and reaching

audiences that may not use ICTs.

- Community security is a shared responsibility for citizens, security forces and authorities. Local governments and security forces need to reflect community values and shared goals. If they do, ICTs can be beneficial, both in reducing conflict tensions and working to mitigate triggers that cause conflicts to become violent. But other non-ICT tools may be just as appropriate.
- If ICTs are imposed externally in an effort to find a 'solution' to 'conflict', they are likely to be ineffective and unsustainable, and can do more harm than good.

We make the following recommendations to those engaging in peacebuilding and conflict prevention at local levels:

- Where ICTs are used to develop communication channels, they should build on local people's existing engagement with technology. Introducing equipment, software or practices outside of people's comfort zone will require significant groundwork and adds risk to the sustainability and viability of projects.
- External agencies should be wary of introducing ICT innovations and avoid short-term 'fixes'. Instead, they should support local partners who enjoy trust and respect, and plan for longer-term relationship-building and support to locally driven mechanisms for strengthening communication – which may or may not include ICTs.

## Authors

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## About Making All Voices Count

Making All Voices Count is a programme working towards a world in which open, effective and participatory governance is the norm and not the exception. This Grand Challenge focuses global attention on creative and cutting-edge solutions to transform the relationship between citizens and their governments. The field of technology for Open Government is relatively young and the consortium partners, Hivos, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and Ushahidi, are a part of this rapidly developing domain. These institutions have extensive and complementary skills and experience in the field of citizen engagement, government accountability, private sector entrepreneurs, (technical) innovation and research.

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## Research, Evidence and Learning component

The programme's research, evidence and learning contributes to improving performance and practice, and builds an evidence base in the fields of citizen voice, government responsiveness, transparency and accountability (T&A) and technology for T&A (Tech4T&A). This component is managed by IDS, a leading global organisation for research, teaching and communication with over 30 years' experience of developing knowledge on governance and citizen participation.

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