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**GOVERNANCE, CONFLICT, AND THE PROSPECTS FOR SUSTAINABLE
PEACE IN AFRICA: A SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION ANALYSIS OF
STRUCTURAL DRIVERS AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT MODELS**

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Governance, Conflict, And The Prospects for Sustainable Peace in Africa: A Social Transformation Analysis of Structural Drivers and Conflict Management Models

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Abstract:

Purpose of study: This study examines the relationship between governance failure, conflict, and prospects for sustainable peace in Africa. It analyses how institutional weakness, political exclusion, neopatrimonialism, social exclusion, and security-sector failures contribute to conflict, while assessing mediation, negotiation, and transitional justice through a social transformation perspective.

Methodology: The study adopts a qualitative, conceptual and documentary research approach. It synthesises governance and peacebuilding literature alongside evidence from selected African cases, including the Central African Republic, Sahel,

Ethiopia, Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Sudan, and South Sudan. The analysis evaluates conflict-management models using social transformation criteria.

Findings: The analysis establishes that African conflicts are not inevitable consequences of poverty, ethnic diversity, resource scarcity, or cultural differences, but are significantly shaped by governance choices and institutional failures. Five interconnected dimensions emerge: institutional weakness and state fragility, political exclusion and electoral manipulation, neopatrimonial and predatory governance, ethnic and social exclusion, and security sector abuse. These failures intensify grievances, weaken legitimacy, and create conditions for violent mobilisation. Mediation and negotiation can effectively halt violence and create political space but may encourage elite capture when participation is narrow. Transitional justice promotes accountability, truth, dignity, and reconciliation but may inadequately address structural inequalities when focused primarily on individual perpetrators.

Conclusion: Sustainable peace in Africa is fundamentally a governance and social transformation project. Mediation, negotiation, and transitional justice are most effective when embedded within broader reforms addressing exclusion, inequality, institutional weakness, accountability, and social relations. Strengthening inclusive and capable institutions, supported by African regional peace architectures, offers a more durable pathway from conflict management to positive peace.

Keywords: *governance failure; conflict; peacebuilding; mediation; transitional justice; social transformation; Africa*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Governance plays a central role in shaping whether societies experience peaceful political competition, recurring conflict or sustainable peace. Effective governance promotes inclusive decision-making, justice, accountability, equitable resource distribution and access to public services, whereas exclusion, corruption, institutional weakness and unequal opportunities can generate grievances that escalate into conflict. Consequently, sustainable peace requires more than ending violence; it requires transforming the political, economic and social structures that reproduce conflict. UNDP (2022) emphasises that effective conflict prevention depends on inclusive institutions, social cohesion and locally grounded approaches that address structural causes of instability.

Globally, experiences from Ukraine and Afghanistan demonstrate the importance of institutional capacity in periods of instability. In Ukraine, continued government service delivery and support through the World Bank's PEACE project strengthened institutional resilience during war, reaching more than 13 million beneficiaries by 2023 (World Bank, 2023). Conversely, Afghanistan experienced substantial economic and institutional disruption following the 2021 political transition, with GDP contracting by 20% between 2020 and 2021 (UNDP, 2022). These experiences demonstrate how governance capacity can influence resilience and prospects for peace.

Across Africa, governance challenges remain closely associated with political exclusion, resource competition, inequality and weak institutions. Uwa and Iloh (2022) argue that sustainable peace requires stronger institutions for conflict prevention and resolution, while Mlaba and Joseph (2023) identify exclusion, discrimination, corruption and limited civic engagement as factors undermining peacebuilding. African experiences in Nigeria, South Africa, Ethiopia and Liberia further demonstrate the importance of leadership, participation and social cohesion in post-conflict peacebuilding (Akpan et al., 2024).

Kenya provides an important local context because political tensions, inequality, marginalisation, resource competition and competing claims over accountability continue to influence conflict vulnerability (UNDP Kenya, 2026). Although the relatively peaceful 2022 General Election demonstrated the contribution of institutions, citizens and peace actors to conflict prevention (United Nations, 2022), persistent structural grievances indicate that peace remains vulnerable. The study therefore examines governance, structural conflict drivers and conflict management models through a social transformation perspective to understand pathways towards sustainable peace in Africa.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Africa continues to experience conflicts driven by the interaction of political exclusion, inequality, resource competition, weak institutions and limited accountability. Although

countries have established democratic institutions, peace agreements, mediation mechanisms and national peacebuilding structures, recurring political and communal violence indicates that many interventions have not sufficiently addressed the structural conditions that reproduce conflict. Uwa and Iloh (2022) emphasise the importance of stronger institutions for conflict prevention, management and resolution, while Mlaba and Joseph (2023) associate conflict recurrence with weak state capacity, marginalisation, corruption and inadequate civic engagement.

In Nigeria, farmer-herder conflicts, resource competition, ethnic tensions and organised criminality continue to challenge peacebuilding efforts, demonstrating the interaction between governance weaknesses and local grievances (UNDP, 2023). Kenya similarly faces political, economic, ethnic and resource-related tensions despite progress in peace infrastructure and conflict-prevention mechanisms. The relatively peaceful 2022 General Election demonstrated the contribution of institutions, dialogue and preventive mechanisms to peacebuilding (United Nations in Kenya, 2024). Nevertheless, marginalisation, inequality, resource competition, climate pressures and ethno-political competition continue to increase conflict vulnerability (UNDP Kenya, 2026). The problem, therefore, lies in the limited integration of governance, structural conflict drivers and conflict-management approaches within a social transformation perspective. This study addresses this gap by examining how institutions, power relations, inequalities and conflict-management models influence prospects for sustainable peace in Africa.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Governance in the African Context

Governance is understood here broadly as the mechanisms, processes, and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate interests, exercise rights, meet obligations, and mediate differences in the management of collective affairs. This includes formal institutions, constitutions, legislatures, judiciaries, security services, and bureaucracies, as well as the informal norms and power relations that shape how those institutions actually function in practice. A central analytical distinction in African governance scholarship is between formal institutional design and informal governance practice. Many African constitutions' guarantee fundamental rights, judicial independence, and competitive elections, yet these formal commitments are frequently diluted or circumvented in practice by elites more concerned with retaining power and channels of accumulation than with the public interest. Maina (2021) frames this as a gap between the governance citizens are constitutionally entitled to and the governance they actually experience; it is this gap, rather than the absence of formal democratic provisions as such, that erodes state legitimacy and creates the grievance structures on which armed opposition can be built.

2.2 Grievance, Greed, and Governance Failure

Three theoretical traditions have shaped the study of conflict's political economy in Africa. The grievance tradition, tracing to Gurr's (1970) relative-deprivation thesis, holds that perceived political or material injustice, particularly when organised along ethnic, regional, or religious lines, is a principal driver of collective violence. A second tradition, associated with Collier and Hoeffler's (2004) work on the economic causes of civil war, emphasises the material opportunities that conflict affords armed actors, including the capture of lootable resources and state revenue. Subsequent research has substantially qualified the 'greed' thesis, showing that resource wealth predicts conflict only in interaction with weak governance and accountability; it is this institutional mediation, rather than resource endowments alone, that produces a 'resource curse' effect (Harnois & Gagnon, 2023).

A governance-failure synthesis, which this article adopts as its principal analytical lens, integrates both traditions while placing institutional quality at the centre of the explanation. On this account, inclusive, accountable, and capable governance institutions can absorb and manage the distributive and identity-based demands generated by poverty, resource competition, and social diversity without recourse to violence; exclusionary, corrupt, and weak institutions cannot, and the same underlying tensions instead escalate into armed conflict.

2.3 The Social Transformation Perspective

The social transformation perspective, developed most fully in the peacebuilding literature by Lederach (2003), and extended by Mac Ginty (2021) and Murithi (2022), treats violent conflict as a symptom of deeper structural, relational, and cultural pathologies rather than merely a breakdown in elite communication. Lederach (2003) distinguishes conflict settlement, the cessation of direct violence through negotiated agreement, from conflict transformation, change at the structural, relational, cultural, and personal levels that removes the underlying conditions that reproduce violence. On this view, sustainable peace must be pursued simultaneously at the elite, middle-range, and grassroots levels, a claim that resonates with Mac Ginty's (2021) concept of 'everyday peace', the mundane practices through which ordinary people sustain coexistence across social divides regardless of elite-level settlements. Murithi (2022) adds an explicitly African inflection, arguing that indigenous conflict-management resources, including restorative and community-oriented conceptions of justice associated with the Southern African philosophy of ubuntu, 'I am because we are', offer a relational counterpoint to individualised Western justice paradigms and deserve a central rather than marginal place in African peacebuilding practice (Kurtz, 2022).

This perspective yields a set of evaluative criteria against which conflict management models can be assessed: their capacity to identify and address structural causes of conflict; their inclusiveness of populations beyond elite actors; their contribution to institutional and governance transformation; their capacity to foster relational and psychosocial healing; their cultural legitimacy, including engagement with indigenous justice mechanisms; and their

orientation toward positive peace, understood as conditions of justice and opportunity, rather than merely the absence of direct violence.

3. Dimensions of Governance Failure and Their Relationship to Conflict

3.1 Institutional Weakness and State Fragility

The most basic dimension of governance failure associated with conflict is the incapacity of formal state institutions, security services, revenue authorities, and courts, to perform their core functions. State fragility, as conceptualised in the OECD's (2022) framework, compounds this functional deficit with a legitimacy deficit: the perception among citizens that the state cannot or will not guarantee security, justice, and welfare. Weak states generate conflict through several interlocking mechanisms. Where the state cannot guarantee physical security, non-state armed actors, insurgents, militias, and criminal networks, fill the resulting vacuum, typically at further cost to civilian security. Where the state cannot deliver basic services, education, health, and economic opportunity, the material grievances that underlie tension remain unresolved. And where governance is neither fair nor efficient, disputes that could otherwise be settled peacefully accumulate until they erupt into violence.

The Central African Republic illustrates this dynamic starkly. Since independence, successive governments have exercised only intermittent authority beyond the capital, leaving much of the country beyond effective state control and enabling the proliferation of armed groups, including the mostly Christian and animist anti-Balaka militias and the predominantly Muslim Séléka coalition. The conflict is frequently described in religious terms, but this framing obscures its governance origins: the failure of state institutions to guarantee security and livelihoods across communities created the opening that political entrepreneurs then exploited by mobilising religious identity for violent ends.

A comparable dynamic is visible across the Sahel, where the gradual retreat of state authority from vast rural and peripheral areas of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has enabled the expansion of jihadist groups, including Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State affiliate in the region. Haidara's (2023) analysis of the spread of jihadism in the Sahel finds that governance deficits, the absence of services, justice, and predictable security, function as a more consistent driver of recruitment and territorial expansion than religious ideology per se, particularly in rural areas long neglected by central governments. This finding is consistent with the broader pattern documented across the region, where corruption, abusive policing, and the collapse of local administration have proven more reliable predictors of jihadist advance than any single ideological factor.

3.2 Political Exclusion and Electoral Manipulation

A second dimension concerns the exclusion of citizens, and particularly of politically marginalised communities, from meaningful participation in collective decision-making.

Where formal channels for influencing political outcomes are closed or manipulated, some actors conclude that peaceful participation is futile and turn to violence instead.

Ethnic exclusion from central government is among the most robust predictors of civil conflict identified in the comparative literature: groups that have been ‘downgraded’ from a position of prior representation to exclusion face a particularly acute risk of mobilising for violence. Ethiopia's Tigray war, which erupted in November 2020 after nearly three decades of Tigrayan-dominated rule under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front gave way, following the 2018 political transition led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, to the political marginalisation of the Tigray People's Liberation Front, exemplifies this trajectory. Afriyie, Ayangbah, and Effah (2023) trace the war's origins to this reconfiguration of the ruling coalition and the resulting sense of existential threat felt by a constituency that had, for nearly thirty years, occupied the centre of Ethiopian political life; the conflict that followed is estimated to have caused several hundred thousand deaths and mass displacement, underscoring the human cost of unmanaged political downgrading.

Electoral manipulation constitutes a related governance failure. Elections widely perceived as rigged have repeatedly served as triggers for political violence across the continent. Kenya's disputed 2007 presidential election, in which the incumbent was declared the winner amid credible allegations of manipulation, precipitated the 2007–2008 post-election violence, in which more than a thousand people were killed and hundreds of thousands displaced. Recent scholarship situates this violence within a longer history of elite manipulation of ethnicised land grievances in the Rift Valley, in which political actors mobilised historical injustices around colonial-era displacement to organise communal violence along ethnic lines (Ndiema, 2026). The comparative record, including Côte d'Ivoire in 2010–2011, Zimbabwe in 2008, and Guinea in 2020, confirms that the absence of credible, independent electoral institutions is a recurring structural condition for election-related violence, rather than an incidental feature of any single national context.

3.3 Neopatrimonialism and Predatory Governance

A third dimension concerns neopatrimonial governance, a mode of rule in which formal-legal state structures are overlaid with informal patrimonial relationships through which leaders secure loyalty by distributing material resources, jobs, contracts, land, and cash, to networks of clients. Harnois and Gagnon (2023) show that neopatrimonial governance is not merely inefficient but actively corrosive of conflict-prevention capacity: it systematically diverts public resources away from the broad-based investment in infrastructure, education, and economic opportunity needed to address the very material grievances that generate social tension, while simultaneously raising the stakes of political competition, since the loss of office can mean the loss of the resources needed to sustain a patronage network and protect its members from prosecution. Where losing power carries this magnitude of cost, ruling elites have strong incentives to resort to electoral fraud, repression, or violence to retain it.

The Democratic Republic of Congo offers perhaps the starkest illustration of this pattern's conflict consequences. Since independence, the country's exceptional mineral wealth, cobalt, coltan, diamonds, and gold, has been systematically diverted through networks of politicians, businesspeople, and military officers rather than channelled into public institutions. In the eastern provinces, more than three decades of intermittent armed conflict have been sustained in significant part by the economic incentives that ungoverned resource extraction creates for armed actors. The renewed offensive by the March 23 Movement (M23) since 2021, and its dramatic escalation from late 2024, illustrates the continuity of this dynamic: the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2025) identifies corrupt and abusive security institutions, unresolved local grievances over land, identity, and political representation, and the state's persistent incapacity to offer credible governance alternatives as the underlying drivers that outlast any single ceasefire or peace process, even as international mediation efforts under the Nairobi, Luanda, and other regional processes have periodically reduced the immediate intensity of fighting.

3.4 Ethnic and Social Exclusion

A fourth dimension concerns the political management of social diversity. The existence of multiple ethnic, religious, or linguistic communities within a single polity is not, on its own, a reliable predictor of conflict; ethnic categories in Africa are substantially constructed rather than fixed, and their political salience depends on the incentives that governance institutions create for ethnic, rather than cross-cutting, political mobilisation. Electoral systems, resource-allocation processes, and federal arrangements that reward ethnic solidarity and penalise cross-community cooperation create strong incentives for political entrepreneurs to mobilise identity as a competitive tool; conversely, governance systems that build in power-sharing, proportional representation, and constitutionally protected minority rights can substantially reduce this risk.

The Rwandan genocide of 1994, in which some eight hundred thousand Tutsi and moderate Hutu were killed over approximately one hundred days, represents the most extreme case of this dynamic on the continent. The genocide was executed by radical political entrepreneurs who mobilised ethnic hatred as a political weapon, but the ethnicisation of Rwandan social and political life on which they drew had deep governance roots, in colonial-era identity documentation, unequal access to education and employment, and a political narrative that constructed the Tutsi minority as an alien and dehumanised population. The lesson is not that ethnic diversity produces violence, but that governance decisions about how diversity is administered carry consequences that can be measured in human lives.

Sudan presents a related, though distinct, pattern. Since independence, governments centred in Khartoum have systematically privileged the country's Arab Muslim communities of the Nile Valley over the non-Arab populations of Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile, and the south, denying these peripheral regions political access, developmental investment, and, at critical junctures, physical security. The resulting conflicts, including the civil war that culminated in South Sudan's 2011 independence and the Darfur atrocities of the 2000s,

reflect governance choices about the allocation of political access and resources rather than any inherent or inevitable communal antagonism. Human Rights Watch's (2023) documentation of continuing large-scale abuses amid Sudan's ongoing conflict underscores that this governance pattern has not been resolved by the country's various political transitions, and that civilian populations in peripheral regions continue to bear its cost.

3.5 Security Sector Governance Failures

The fifth dimension concerns the governance of the security sector itself, including military forces, police, intelligence services, and informal security actors such as community militias. Security institutions are simultaneously among the most important instruments for managing conflict and, when poorly governed, among its most significant drivers. Documented pathologies in African security sector governance include the use of security forces to protect regimes rather than populations, human rights abuses including extrajudicial killing and sexual violence, the diversion of defence resources for private gain, weak civilian oversight, and ethnically or factionally skewed recruitment and promotion.

Where security forces inflict violence on the very populations they are meant to protect, communities that might otherwise have remained neutral can be radicalised toward armed opposition. In north-eastern Nigeria, heavy-handed counter-insurgency operations against Boko Haram in the movement's early years, including mass civilian casualties and detentions, are widely credited with having accelerated rather than contained the insurgency's growth, by confirming to affected communities that the state security apparatus, rather than the insurgents, represented the more immediate threat to their safety. Comparable dynamics have been documented in the security responses to jihadist violence across the Sahel, where abusive counter-terrorism operations have, in numerous cases, driven recruitment into the very groups they were intended to suppress (Haidara, 2023).

It is worth noting, finally, that these five dimensions interact with, rather than substitute for, material and environmental pressures. Comparative research on the Middle East and North Africa, for example, finds that climate stress rarely translates into violent conflict on its own; rather, its effect on conflict risk is mediated by governance arrangements, including the capacity of institutions to manage migration, competition over land and water, and livelihood loss without resorting to exclusionary or repressive responses (Kim & Ferré Garcia, 2023). A parallel logic plausibly holds across the African Sahel and Horn, where climatic stress on pastoralist and agricultural livelihoods interacts with, rather than independently causes, the governance failures already discussed. This reinforces the article's central claim: governance is not one variable among many but the hinge on which other structural pressures, material, environmental, and demographic, turn toward either peaceful adaptation or violent escalation.

Table 1. Governance Failure Dimensions and Illustrative Cases

Governance failure dimension	Core mechanism linking governance to conflict	Principal illustrative case(s)
Institutional weakness and state fragility	Security, justice, and service vacuums filled by non-state armed actors	Central African Republic; Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger)
Political exclusion and electoral manipulation	Downgrading of once-included groups; contested or manipulated elections	Ethiopia (Tigray war); Kenya (2007–2008 post-election violence)
Neopatrimonialism and predatory governance	Diversion of public resources to patronage networks; high cost of losing power	Democratic Republic of Congo (eastern DRC, M23)
Ethnic and social exclusion	Institutional incentives for ethnic, rather than cross-cutting, mobilisation	Rwanda (1994 genocide); Sudan (Darfur, South Sudan)
Security sector governance failures	Security forces as instruments of abuse rather than protection	Nigeria (Boko Haram counter-insurgency); Sahel

4. The Bidirectional Governance-Conflict Relationship and Regional Architecture

The relationship between governance and conflict is not unidirectional. Armed conflict itself degrades governance capacity, destroying infrastructure, driving skilled personnel from public service, undermining tax revenue, generating displacement, and weakening the norms that sustain the rule of law, thereby reinforcing the very conditions that produced the violence in the first place. South Sudan illustrates this self-reinforcing dynamic clearly. The civil war that erupted in December 2013, and which resumed after the collapse of a 2015 peace accord, compounded an already very low governance capacity inherited at independence in 2011; de Waal (2023) situates the crisis within a political economy in which elite bargaining over access to state resources has repeatedly proven more decisive than formal institutional design in determining whether peace agreements hold. The result has been a persistent governance-conflict trap in which weak institutions produce violence, and violence further erodes institutions.

Regional governance architecture forms an important, if imperfect, counterweight to this dynamic. The African Union's Peace and Security Architecture, anchored in the Peace and Security Council established in 2004 and the Constitutive Act's departure from the Organisation of African Unity's strict non-interference norm, has developed meaningful capacity in early warning, mediation, and the authorisation of peace support operations. Its effectiveness, however, remains constrained by limited resources, divergent member-state interests, and the underlying tension between respect for state sovereignty and the mandate to act in cases of mass atrocity; this tension has been widely noted in the Union's comparatively cautious posture toward crises in Sudan, Ethiopia, and the DRC (Aeby &

Pring, 2023). Sub-regional bodies have shown variable capacity: the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) built substantial mediation infrastructure through episodes such as the interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s, yet the wave of military coups across the Sahel since 2020, in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, has exposed the limits of that architecture's capacity to prevent unconstitutional changes of government even where mediation capacity exists on paper (Aeby & Pring, 2023).

5. Conflict Management Models from a Social Transformation Perspective

5.1 The Mediation and Negotiation Model

Mediation rests on the premise that armed conflict often reflects a breakdown in communication between parties whose interests, while seemingly incompatible, can be reconciled through the intervention of a skilled, impartial third party who helps clarify interests and identify mutually acceptable outcomes, without imposing a settlement. Mediation capacity is well institutionalised across African governance architecture, from the African Union's Panel of the Wise at the continental level to dedicated mediation and security structures within ECOWAS and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), alongside an evolving professional infrastructure of mediation support structures whose institutionalisation across the AU, ECOWAS, IGAD, and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Aeby and Pring (2023) document as uneven but steadily deepening since the early 2010s. Individual African states, including South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, and Algeria, have also played significant bilateral mediating roles in specific conflicts, complemented by international engagement through the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and its special political missions.

From a social transformation standpoint, mediation carries clear strengths. Most fundamentally, it can bring armed actors to the table and halt direct violence, a necessary precondition for any longer-term process of reconstruction or reconciliation. The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended Sudan's second civil war, though it ultimately failed to prevent renewed conflict following South Sudan's independence, nonetheless ended a war that had killed more than two million people over more than two decades and created the political conditions for the 2011 referendum (de Waal, 2023). Where mediation processes are designed to incorporate structural elements, institutional reform, inclusive participation, and attention to root causes rather than narrowly political settlements, they can additionally contribute to the deeper transformation that sustainable peace requires; Cho and Landau's (2023) review of recent trends in peace mediation research documents a growing practitioner and scholarly emphasis on precisely this kind of comprehensive design.

Mediation's principal limitation, from a social transformation perspective, is its persistent tendency toward elite capture. In practice, mediation processes frequently centre on negotiations between the leaders of armed factions and political parties, with limited participation from the civilian populations who have borne the conflict's costs and whose buy-in is often decisive for an agreement's durability. Where agreements are perceived as

self-serving arrangements among political and military elites rather than as responsive to broader social needs, implementation tends to be weak; the successive collapse of South Sudan's 2015 and 2018 peace agreements, both structured primarily around the redistribution of positions among competing elites rather than the resolution of underlying structural drivers, illustrates this risk (de Waal, 2023). The Darfur peace process offers a comparable cautionary example: successive agreements produced formal texts without translating into durable peace for Darfur's population, in substantial part because they addressed power-sharing between faction leaders without confronting the marginalisation, discriminatory resource allocation, and impunity that had driven the underlying conflict. A further limitation concerns gender: despite the normative commitments of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace, and security, women's substantive participation in formal African mediation processes remains persistently limited, notwithstanding evidence that inclusive participation improves the durability of resulting agreements (UN Women, 2021).

These limitations, however, are best understood as failures of design rather than inherent flaws in mediation as an instrument. Mediation processes that deliberately extend participation to civil society, women's organisations, religious communities, and traditional authorities, as in the 2008 Kenya National Dialogue and Reconciliation process that followed the post-election crisis, tend to produce more socially legitimate outcomes and more comprehensive structural reform agendas. Comprehensive agreements that build in constitutional redesign, security sector reform, and reconstruction provisions, such as the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Burundi (2000), have likewise demonstrated a stronger capacity to consolidate governance gains over the following decade.

5.2 The Transitional Justice Model

Transitional justice refers to the range of judicial and non-judicial processes societies use to address past human rights violations as they emerge from conflict or authoritarian rule, encompassing criminal prosecution, truth commissions, reparations, institutional vetting, memorialisation, and indigenous or community-based justice and healing mechanisms. The field rests on two linked premises: that impunity for serious violations signals future tolerance for such conduct, undermining accountability, and that unacknowledged suffering forecloses the truth-telling on which relational healing depends.

African transitional justice practice has generated some of the field's most consequential and most studied examples. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and active from 1996 to 1998, combined public testimony from victims with conditional amnesty for perpetrators who made full disclosure, establishing an authoritative public record of apartheid-era abuses even as its reparations programme and accountability mechanisms for the era's most serious crimes remained limited in practice. Rwanda's *gacaca* courts, community-based tribunals drawing on traditional dispute-resolution practice, tried more than 1.9 million genocide-related cases between 2002 and 2012, achieving a scale of participation in post-genocide accountability that no conventional

court system could have matched, while also generating documented tensions, including perceptions of victors' justice arising from the exclusion of crimes committed by the incumbent Rwandan Patriotic Front from the gacaca mandate. At the level of international criminal justice, prosecutions before the Special Court for Sierra Leone, including the 2012 conviction of former Liberian President Charles Taylor, and before the International Criminal Court (ICC), including the 2012 conviction of Congolese militia leader Thomas Lubanga for the recruitment of child soldiers, have advanced international accountability norms and offered victims a measure of formal recognition, at the cost of a legitimacy contest that has become central to the model's African reception.

From a social transformation perspective, the Transitional Justice Model's central limitation lies in its frequent emphasis on individual criminal accountability at the expense of the structural and collective dimensions of injustice that a governance-failure analysis identifies as central to conflict's origins. Prosecuting individual perpetrators, while important for accountability, does little to address the systemic exclusion, inequitable resource distribution, or abusive security governance that produced the conditions for mass violence in the first place. Kenya's experience is instructive: the ICC's case against senior political figures implicated in the 2007–2008 post-election violence collapsed amid witness withdrawal widely attributed to political interference, and, independently of that outcome, the process did not engage the underlying land inequalities and patronage structures in the Rift Valley that domestic ethnic-mobilisation research has since identified as central to the violence (Ndiema, 2026); the country's own Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission produced structural reform recommendations that the government subsequently declined to implement.

A second limitation concerns the contested relationship between international criminal justice and local legitimacy. The ICC has faced sustained criticism for what critics characterise as a disproportionate focus on African situations relative to comparable violations elsewhere, a critique that Benyera (2022) develops into a broader argument that the Court's African record reflects patterns of selective enforcement inherited from earlier configurations of global power, even as other scholars caution that framing the critique purely in terms of Western double standards can obscure the more complex, partly self-inflicted, dimensions of the Court's legitimacy challenges on the continent, including the role African governments themselves have played in referring cases and later disavowing the resulting prosecutions (Christiano, 2023). Where transitional justice mechanisms are perceived as externally imposed rather than locally owned, their capacity to contribute to relational healing and sustainable peace is correspondingly weakened.

A third limitation concerns the sequencing tension between justice and peace. Actors facing plausible international prosecution may have reduced incentives to enter peace negotiations, since doing so offers no assurance of protection from subsequent accountability; the ICC's arrest warrants for Lord's Resistance Army commanders in Uganda and for former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir have both been cited as complicating factors in contemporaneous

peace processes, even as the empirical weight of this tension remains debated within the literature.

As with mediation, however, these limitations point toward questions of design rather than an inherent incompatibility between transitional justice and social transformation. Victim-centred processes that prioritise the substantive participation of the most affected and most marginalised populations, including women, children, and geographically isolated communities, tend to generate stronger outcomes for dignity restoration and social healing. Embedding transitional justice within a wider programme of governance reform, security sector reform, and economic reconstruction, rather than treating it as a stand-alone intervention, substantially improves its transformative potential. And the incorporation of indigenous justice and healing practices as culturally legitimate complements to formal mechanisms, exemplified by the Acholi mato oput reconciliation ceremony in northern Uganda, can extend transitional justice's reach into forms of community-level healing that formal courts alone cannot achieve (Kurtz, 2022).

Table 2. Comparative Assessment of the Two Conflict Management Models against Social Transformation Criteria

<i>Social transformation criterion</i>	<i>Mediation and Negotiation Model</i>	<i>Transitional Justice Model</i>
Addresses structural causes of conflict	Limited unless deliberately designed to include structural reform provisions	Limited where focused narrowly on individual criminal accountability
Inclusiveness beyond elite actors	Weak by default; strengthened through deliberate civil-society and women's inclusion	Stronger where victim-centred and community-based mechanisms are prioritised
Contribution to institutional and governance transformation	Can be strong when agreements embed constitutional and security sector reform	Indirect; depends on political will to implement structural recommendations
Relational and psychosocial healing	Limited; oriented toward political settlement rather than healing	Central objective, particularly through truth-telling and community mechanisms
Cultural legitimacy and use of indigenous mechanisms	Can incorporate traditional mediation (e.g. elders' councils, palaver traditions)	Can incorporate indigenous justice (e.g. gacaca, mato oput)
Orientation toward positive rather than negative peace	Primarily negative peace unless embedded in wider reform	Potentially positive peace where acknowledgement and structural reform combine

6. Toward Integration: Complementarity and Institutional Consolidation

The preceding analysis suggests that mediation and transitional justice address distinct but complementary dimensions of the conflict-to-peace transition: mediation halts violence and opens political space for institutional renewal, while transitional justice addresses the historical and relational dimensions of harm, restoring dignity to victims and establishing normative foundations for a non-violent future. Their combination, embedded within a wider process of economic reconstruction, security sector reform, and inclusive governance-building, offers a more credible pathway to sustainable peace than either model pursued in isolation.

Sierra Leone illustrates this integration in practice. The 1999 Lomé Peace Agreement, brokered with ECOWAS involvement, ended the country's civil war and enabled the disarmament and demobilisation of armed groups; it was subsequently complemented by the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which provided a forum for historical reckoning, and the Special Court for Sierra Leone, which prosecuted those bearing the greatest responsibility for the conflict's worst atrocities. Combined with a sustained reconstruction programme addressing the security sector, the economy, and social services, this layered approach has been associated with a fragile but meaningful improvement in the country's peace and governance trajectory over the subsequent two decades. Mozambique offers a different but complementary illustration: the 1992 Rome Peace Agreement, mediated by the Community of Sant'Egidio with United Nations and bilateral support, ended the civil war between Renamo and Frelimo without establishing formal transitional justice mechanisms, relying instead on informal, culturally embedded reconciliation practices, traditional healing ceremonies, community cleansing rituals, and reintegration processes for former combatants, that sustained a relatively durable peace through the 1990s and early 2000s. The Mozambican case underscores Mac Ginty's (2021) observation that every day, community-level peace practices can substitute for, or usefully complement, formal institutional mechanisms.

Integration is not without tension. The most persistent friction is the peace-versus-justice dilemma discussed above, for which practitioners have developed several practical strategies: sequencing accountability mechanisms after an initial political settlement has stabilised; conditional amnesty arrangements that trade reduced accountability for disarmament and truth-telling while preserving accountability for the gravest violations; and accountability processes that concentrate prosecutorial resources on those bearing greatest responsibility rather than the full universe of perpetrators.

At the institutional level, the African Union's evolving peace and security architecture increasingly reflects this integrative logic. The Union's Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development Policy, adopted in 2006 and revised in 2020, organises peacebuilding around six thematic pillars, security, political governance, human rights and reconciliation, economic reconstruction, infrastructure and social services, and coordination, that explicitly embed transitional justice within a broader social transformation framework. The African

Union's Transitional Justice Policy, adopted in 2019 after roughly a decade of consultation, similarly articulates a distinctively African approach that privileges community healing alongside individual accountability and formally recognises indigenous justice mechanisms (African Union, 2019, 2020). The persistent challenge, as Aeby and Pring's (2023) assessment of the Union's mediation and peace-support architecture suggests more broadly, lies less in the adequacy of these normative frameworks than in the gap between their articulation and their implementation, a gap shaped by the tension between the AU's non-interference norms and the political interests of powerful member states, and by chronic resource constraints on the Union's peace and security institutions.

The quality of a country's underlying governance, in turn, shapes how receptive it is likely to be to this kind of integrated peacebuilding architecture in the first place. Comparative governance indices, such as the Mo Ibrahim Foundation's (2023) Ibrahim Index of African Governance, consistently show that countries scoring poorly on rule of law, personal safety, and participation are disproportionately represented among the continent's active or recent conflict settings, a pattern consistent with the governance-failure thesis advanced throughout this article and a reminder that peace processes do not operate on a governance-neutral canvas. Where baseline governance capacity is very low, as in South Sudan or the Central African Republic, even well-designed mediation and transitional justice interventions face a steeper climb toward embedding their gains in durable institutions, which is precisely why the social transformation literature insists that conflict management cannot be separated from the longer-term governance reform agenda set out in Section 7.

7. Policy Implications

Three implications follow from this analysis for peacebuilding practice and governance reform in Africa. First, because conflict is fundamentally rooted in governance failure across multiple, interacting dimensions, sustainable peace requires governance transformation rather than conflict management narrowly conceived; this entails expanding political inclusion for marginalised groups, building anti-corruption and accountability institutions capable of constraining neopatrimonial practice, reforming security sectors toward civilian oversight and representative recruitment, and designing electoral and constitutional systems that reduce the winner-takes-all stakes of political competition. Kenya's post-2010 devolution reforms, which transferred substantial political and fiscal authority from the national to the county level, illustrate one structural response to the governance failures that produced the 2007–2008 violence, even as the country continues to confront significant governance challenges.

Second, conflict management interventions, whether mediation or transitional justice, achieve greater social-transformation value when their design deliberately incorporates the inclusiveness, structural-reform, and cultural-legitimacy criteria identified in Section 2.3, rather than being left to default toward elite-centred or individually focused models. This is a matter of process design that mediators, transitional justice practitioners, and their

institutional sponsors can act on directly, independent of the deeper political-economy constraints that shape broader governance reform.

Third, the effectiveness of continental and regional peace and security architecture depends on closing the gap between normative commitment and political will and resourcing. This requires sustained financial and technical investment in African Union and regional economic community peace institutions, more consistent political backing from member states for the AU's evolving departure from strict non-interference, and deeper partnership between regional institutions and the African civil society organisations that have often proven more consistently oriented toward social transformation than have national political leaderships.

8. Conclusion

This article has examined the relationship between governance and conflict in Africa and evaluated the relevance of two major conflict management models to sustainable peace from a social transformation perspective. The evidence assembled across the Central African Republic, the Sahel, Ethiopia, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Sudan, and South Sudan supports the central thesis that conflict in Africa is not the inevitable product of poverty, resource scarcity, or ethnic diversity, but the outcome of specific and, in principle, reversible governance choices, over who is included in political power, how public resources are allocated, how security forces are organised and held accountable, and how political institutions are designed to manage or exploit social diversity.

The analysis of the Mediation and Negotiation Model and the Transitional Justice Model reinforces this conclusion. Both models make indispensable contributions to the transition from violence to peace, yet both carry characteristic limitations when viewed against social transformation criteria: mediation's tendency toward elite capture and transitional justice's tendency toward individualised accountability at the expense of structural reform. These limitations are best addressed not by abandoning either model but by deliberately designing both to be inclusive, structurally oriented, and culturally legitimate, and by embedding them within the wider institutional and social transformation that durable peace requires. The African Union's Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development Policy and Transitional Justice Policy provide an increasingly coherent normative framework for this integration; the outstanding challenge lies in political will and resourcing rather than institutional design. Sustainable peace and security in Africa remains, in the end, a governance project: an achievable, if demanding, commitment to building the accountable, inclusive, and capable institutions without which neither development nor security can be sustained.

9. References

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