



Peacebuilding at a Turning Point

An Incisive Review of Peacebuilding Strategies
in the Context of a Tech-savvy and Highly
Engaged Generation

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INTRODUCTION

Peacebuilding is an enabler of development, security, social and economic justice, and reconciliation. This means creating conditions for sustainable peaceful coexistence and social change by addressing structural causes of conflicts and violence. REINVENT believes that sustaining peace requires coherence, sustained engagement and coordination among national and local government entities, non-state actors and other stakeholders engaging in peace and security. Ownership and leadership in peacebuilding are important, as responsibility for sustaining peace is broadly shared with the entire society.

REINVENT's engagements have contributed to reduction of tensions, prevention of violence, and creation of an enabling environment for development initiatives to succeed in the target regions, utilising various strategies to influence peacebuilding platforms, systems, and structures of government and communities to promote sustainability of actions and build resilience. REINVENT notes that behavior change amongst stakeholders is essential and relies on consistency of interventions that, not only secure the involvement of state and non-state actors, but also ensures the active participation of local communities to achieve the set peacebuilding goals.

BACKGROUND

Kenya is currently rocked by protests that represent a significant challenge to President William Ruto's presidency and the resilience of Kenya's democratic institutions. Two months after President Ruto's state visit to the United States, peaceful youth-led protests in Kenya over the contentious Finance Bill 2024 have turned deadly. On 25th June 2024, protesters managed to storm parliament after the members of parliament moved the controversial bill to its final stage – signing by the president.

The protests are triggered by several issues including cost of living crisis due to high inflation rates, a high youth unemployment rate at 68%¹, a real and perceived departure of state agencies from the rule of law, corruption, among others. The government justifies a hike in taxes as the antidote for Kenya's debt crisis. The tax burden amid a hike in cost of living is seen as punitive especially by the youth, who make up 75% of Kenya's population according to its 2019 census. The movement #RejectFinanceBill2024 on Instagram, TikTok, and X helped to mobilise a series of peaceful protests across the country, and represents a revolution aided by technology. Young Kenyans are eager to participate in driving Kenya's economic growth. However, the sentiment remains that the policies in question do not correspond with promises by government to cut its spending, reduce taxation, and ease the cost of living.

The youth movement has been christened 'Gen Z protests' as youth have taken the lead in educating, sharing information, and amplifying the protests and their demands. What was initially a rejection of the tax proposals,

morphed into protests against the entire government for its perceived and real corruption, opulence, and impunity. These protests are not only a test for President Ruto but also a test for Kenya's democratic institutions.

There has been a public uproar over police action especially disregard of human rights, use of live bullets and excessive force against protestors that has left many injured and several others dead. Reports² also indicate that the police have abducted activists, while authorities have threatened to shut down local media, all while the country is experiencing internet connectivity interruptions. The Kenya Defense Forces (KDF) were deployed to help the police quell the protests, which, according to the President, were infiltrated and hijacked by a group of organised criminals³. The Law Society of Kenya argues that this deployment of the KDF is unconstitutional, as the state has not demonstrated that the police were overwhelmed in dealing with protestors. Fear of a repetition of the post-election violence of 2007 has also arisen as Kenyans online draw parallels between the repression of 2007 and the current violence on the streets.

Responses from civil society have been varied but largely carry a similar message that the government has failed to uphold the Constitution and that its conduct and actions continue to undermine and violate human rights and rule of law. This is compounded by an entrenched culture of impunity, where constitutional and human rights violations are rarely met with accountability or meaningful remedies for affected victims.

¹ Government of Kenya, Sessional Paper No.1 of 2023 on Kenya National Policy for Sustainable Development

² KNCHR, Update on the Status of Human Rights in Kenya during the Anti-Finance Bill Protests, 18 June 2024

³ President Ruto's speech during a Media Roundtable held on 30th June 2024 at State House, Nairobi www.kbc.co.ke/ruto-gen-z-did-not-torch-parliament-criminals-infiltrated-peaceful-protests/

Furthermore, independent constitutional commissions intended to provide oversight towards ensuring the government's compliance with established constitutional principles have been significantly weakened through executive interference and inadequate resource allocation. Civil society actors and human rights defenders have offered critical support to affected victims and have been involved in advocacy for accountability, but they too have not been spared from arrests and abductions.

The youth have rejected calls for dialogue and are instead demanding action on the government's commitments

THE RISE OF DIGITAL ACTIVISM

In the ongoing protests, technology has proven to be a powerful tool of communication. The largely egalitarian, leaderless protests have brought together youth who have used social media platforms, messaging applications, and possibly crowdfunding platforms to create and disseminate unifying messages meant to rally them to action – sharing protest plans, locations, and progress, thereby keeping participants informed and motivated.

The youth have leveraged online tools to orchestrate resistance marches with significant turnout. On X, formerly Twitter, for example, hashtags have made it easy for people to track updates related to the movement, as the hashtags appear in every relevant tweet. Additionally, the youth have engaged those they consider key influencers and local celebrities to tweet their support, which has significantly extended the movement's reach and added credibility.

Visual storytelling on Instagram and TikTok have been used to share key moments saved as highlights, allowing newcomers to easily catch up on the movement's progress. Supporters have been encouraged to share

and adherence to constitutional provisions. They have equally cited a lack of faith in the government to uphold its promises as well as the possibility of coercion of its members by the state. This reflects the trust deficit that exists between the political class and the youth who have pointed out that dialogue can only be useful if good faith exists and if it serves the interests of the people. Dialogue, as a peacebuilding tool, has variously been used to bridge the gap between conflicting parties but it is increasingly being viewed as a tool of the political class to hijack a genuine clamor for accountability and reforms.

their photos and videos, fostering a sense of participation and ownership. Further, there have been regular updates on fundraising progress to help maintain momentum and build trust among supporters. Supporters have also been encouraged to share the campaign on their social networks, thereby broadening its reach and increasing contributions.

Online platforms have also been used to share evidence on instances of police brutality during the demonstrations and further demand accountability from government institutions where inaction seems to persist. These platforms have further informed the public on the excesses of the government in the wake of increased taxation and other government policies that are likely to impact negatively.

This blend of real-time communication, community building, and transparent fundraising demonstrates the transformative potential of digital activism, illustrating how everyday technology can power significant social change.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR PEACEBUILDING?

The emergence of new technologies has created new opportunities in the areas of peace and security especially in conflict prevention, peace operations, and peacebuilding. Networking platforms like peer network and discussion forums provide novel opportunities to foster positive contact between conflict groups. It provides tools which can be used in different fields like social, political, cultural, defense, economics, among others, to resolve issues and promote peace.

Traditional peacebuilding in Kenya has relied on strategies such as face to face dialogue and mediation which have been rejected by the youth who are instead calling for concrete action and immediate change from the government regarding issues related to the controversial government policies, transparency, and accountability.

This portends a new era in peacebuilding as the youth redefine the parameters of what they consider elements and requirements, whose realisation, contribute to

peace. These elements include public oversight, good governance and accountability, and respect for human rights and rule of law.

Though the protests have reduced in size and geographic spread, regular countrywide protests are still ongoing with protests of national issues paralleled by more local-level protests that focus on the broken promises and alleged corruption of county-level politicians. The protesters have also adopted non-violence, giving credence to their commitment to maintain peace even as they demand accountability and change.

Protestors have also been quick to diversify their tactics

– from a concert, held on 7th July 2024 to commemorate those who lost their lives during the protests, to a website tracking the government’s albeit slow progress on its promises. The President has thus far been quick in his attempts to deescalate the situation by taking several steps that included announcing the withdrawal of the Finance Bill, austerity by the executive arm, and a new focus on tackling corruption. He has further reconstituted his cabinet incorporating new entrants including some from the opposition party, to form a broad-based government aimed at addressing the prevailing national challenges. He has also ordered the immediate unconditional release of youth arrested during the protests.

VALUE PROPOSITION BY REINVENT

Accountability from a peacebuilding perspective (accountable peace)

The concept of peace has evolved over time, adapting to the changing contexts and dynamics. Just peace, for example, encompasses a vision of peace that goes beyond cessation of violence to address the root causes of conflict and ensure fair treatment for all involved. It integrates justice, equality, and human rights into the fabric of societal interactions. The underlying assumption is peace cannot be sustained without addressing the injustices that lead to conflicts.

Though concepts such as just peace remain relevant, the protests have ushered in accountable peace that reflects a growing recognition of the need for transparency, responsibility, and answerability in governance and peace processes. Accountable peace goes beyond the notion of justice to emphasize the importance of holding stakeholders accountable for their actions, ensuring that processes are inclusive, transparent, and participatory.

The rise in digital technology has transformed the landscape of conflict and peacebuilding. Information is more accessible, and the actions of governments, organisations and individuals are more visible. This transparency has increased demands for accountability in governance.

The ongoing protests conveyed the use of technology-based strategies to drive accountability and transparency for the purpose of maintaining peace and stability for economic growth. This could further be processed through amplifying authentic youth voices and concerns through digital media to highlight issues overlooked by mainstream media and used in advocacy to encourage government accountability.

Effective mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating governance and peace processes are essential for

accountability. Besides the use of independent institutions such as the local and international watchdog groups, technology can be used to facilitate public engagement with elected and nominated leaders at the national and county levels by providing access to their track records. This would entail collecting and documenting detailed information on the track record of a public official and ensure that governance processes are on track as intended.

The President, as part of his reconciliation strategy, held a dialogue with the youth on X and TikTok. Though not very well received by these youth, they nonetheless engaged the President and got the chance to highlight their grievances. Such forums could be encouraged in the future where the President regularly engages citizens on their thoughts on issues of national concern as part of national dialogue, trust building and maintaining accountability.

Many young people have become politically engaged, giving rise to a new generation of organizing and activism. This presents an opportunity to drive civic education using technology and motivate more youth to become voters. Access to information is also an opportunity to reframe civic engagement and duty, in the governance of the country. Tools can be developed for use by the citizens to take their leaders to task once educational material has been disseminated both physically and online.

Further, the recent developments signal a shift from discourse specific to electoral justice to a call for broad based reform that supports the establishment and implementation of robust legal and institutional frameworks critical for holding parties accountable.

This includes strengthening mechanisms for ensuring the realisation of the rule of law, prosecuting economic crimes, and addressing human rights violations.

Peacebuilding should capitalise on digital activism for accountability and as an enabler of political agency. This can include amplifying peaceful voices while shaping the public and political narrative, including countering fake news and threat narratives, addressing potential trigger points such as rumor management and acting as a bridging function between local, national, and international spheres to mobilise action.

The demonstrations signal the dawn of a new era in citizen resistance, spearheaded by young people who are transcending class, gender, regional, political and ethnic divisions. If past reforms have fallen short, these new types of citizen uprisings under a national cause could be the spark that ignites true and lasting change. They could challenge the state to deploy a different language that does not solely centre around violence.

FURTHER DISCUSSION AND ACTION

Creating or establishing the nexus between emerging technologies and impact on peace and security in Kenya is very crucial if not mandatory and all stakeholders should be willing to invest in research and training to utilise these technologies to make them applicable.

Technology can contribute to peacebuilding processes by offering tools that foster collaboration, transform attitudes, and give a stronger voice to communities.

Leaders, on the other hand, face a choice between harnessing emerging technology to improve government effectiveness, increase transparency and foster inclusion, or as a tool of repression, division, and conflict.

Accountable peace is inherently linked to the sustainability of peace. By addressing the root causes of conflict and ensuring that all parties are held accountable for their actions, accountable peace aims to prevent the recurrence of conflict and building a lasting peace.

To better understand how new technologies can contribute to peacebuilding, it is useful to clarify the functions that technologies can perform in conflict prevention and peacebuilding projects that go beyond early warning and response

In exploring the application of technology to peacebuilding, it is important to keep in mind that technologies are not neutral. The Do No Harm framework provides a useful guide for practitioners to assess the risks of introducing technology into peacebuilding programming.



For further information or inquiries, please contact:

- **Email:** reinventkenya@tetrattech.com
- **X (Twitter):** [@ReinventKenya](https://twitter.com/ReinventKenya)
- **Facebook:** [Reinvent Programme](#)
- **LinkedIn:** [Reinvent Programme](#)