



Perceptions of the Capacity of NGOs to Build Societal Peace: A Qualitative Study of NGOs in Kamuli District, Uganda

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Abstract- This study examined perceptions of the capacity of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to contribute to societal peacebuilding in Kamuli District, Uganda. The study was motivated by the growing recognition that NGOs operate at the interface between communities, government institutions and vulnerable populations, placing them in a potentially important position for preventing and transforming conflicts. A qualitative case study design was employed involving three NGOs operating in Kamuli District. Each NGO contributed 15 participants, giving a total of 45 participants comprising managers, project officers and community beneficiaries. Data were analysed thematically, while descriptive percentages were used to demonstrate the distribution of participants' perceptions. Findings revealed that 57% of respondents perceived NGOs as having the greatest capacity to build societal peace, compared with 22% who considered government to have the greatest capacity, while 21% believed that community members themselves had greater responsibility and capacity for building peace. The findings suggest that NGOs are perceived not merely as service-delivery organisations but as important peacebuilding actors because of their proximity to communities, participatory approaches and ability to mobilise local actors. However, the findings also demonstrate that sustainable societal peace cannot be attributed to NGOs alone. Government authority and community ownership remain essential components of a comprehensive peacebuilding architecture. The study argues that the greatest peacebuilding potential lies in strengthening the relationship among NGOs, government and communities rather than positioning these actors in competition with one another.

Keywords- NGOs, peacebuilding, societal peace, community participation, government, conflict transformation, Kamuli District, Uganda.



I. Introduction

Peacebuilding has increasingly moved beyond the traditional understanding that peace is primarily the responsibility of governments and formal security institutions. Contemporary peacebuilding approaches recognise that sustainable peace requires the participation of multiple actors, including civil society organisations, community leaders, religious institutions, local governments, women, youth and other community-based actors.

Non-governmental organisations occupy a particularly important position within this peacebuilding environment. Their close engagement with communities allows them to identify social tensions, support vulnerable populations, facilitate dialogue and promote cooperation among groups. Unlike government institutions, which often operate through formal administrative structures, NGOs frequently work directly with communities through participatory development interventions.

However, the capacity of NGOs to build societal peace should not be assumed. An organisation may promote peace externally while experiencing internal organisational tensions, weak leadership, resource constraints or competition among staff. Consequently, examining how people who interact with NGOs perceive their peacebuilding capacity is important.

This study therefore examined the perceptions of managers, project officers and community beneficiaries concerning which actors have the greatest capacity to build societal peace in Kamuli District. Particular attention was given to whether NGOs, government or community members were perceived as the most capable peacebuilding actors.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine perceptions of the capacity of NGOs to contribute to societal peacebuilding in Kamuli District, Uganda.

Specific Objectives

The study sought to:

- Examine perceptions of NGOs' capacity to build societal peace.



- Assess perceptions of the government's capacity to contribute to societal peacebuilding.
- Examine the perceived responsibility of community members in building sustainable peace.
- Explore the implications of these perceptions for strengthening collaborative peacebuilding among NGOs, government and communities.

II. Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative case study design. The design was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' perceptions of the role and capacity of NGOs in peacebuilding within their actual organisational and community contexts.

Three NGOs operating in Kamuli District were selected as cases. Rather than treating the organisations simply as service providers, the study examined them as social institutions interacting with communities and other peacebuilding actors.

Study Participants

A total of 45 participants participated in the study. Each of the three NGOs contributed 15 participants.

Participants were drawn from three categories:

- NGO managers;
- project officers; and
- community beneficiaries.

This composition enabled the study to capture perspectives from both the organisational and community sides of NGO operations.

Data Collection

Data were obtained from participants concerning their perceptions of the relative capacity of NGOs, government and community members to build societal peace.



Participants were asked to identify the actor they considered to have the greatest capacity and responsibility for building societal peace.

Although the study was qualitative, responses to the central perception question were summarised using percentages to demonstrate the overall pattern emerging from the participants.

Data Analysis

Qualitative responses were examined thematically. The major themes emerging from the data were:

- NGOs as accessible and community-connected peacebuilding actors;
- Government as an institution with formal authority and resources;
- Communities as owners of sustainable peace;
- the need for collaborative peacebuilding.

The quantitative distribution of perceptions was subsequently used to complement the qualitative interpretation.

III. Findings

Overall Perception of Peacebuilding Capacity:

- The findings demonstrate a clear perception that NGOs play an important role in building societal peace in Kamuli District.
- Perceived capacity to build societal peace
- Participants' perceptions of which actor has the greatest capacity to build societal peace in Kamuli District.
- The results indicate that 57% of respondents identified NGOs as having the best capacity to build societal peace. In comparison, 22% identified government, while 21% identified community members as having the greatest capacity.
- The finding that more than half of the respondents selected NGOs is significant. It suggests that NGOs are perceived by people directly connected to their programmes as having a distinctive ability to facilitate peacebuilding at the community level.



NGOs as Important Actors in Societal Peacebuilding:

- The strongest finding was that 57% of respondents perceived NGOs as having the greatest capacity to build peace.
- This perception can be interpreted in relation to the proximity of NGOs to communities. NGOs commonly operate through community mobilisation, training, dialogue, livelihood programmes, women's groups, youth groups and other participatory mechanisms. Such interventions create opportunities for NGOs to address not only the immediate manifestations of conflict but also some of its underlying social and economic causes.
- The finding suggests that participants perceive NGOs as possessing a form of relational capacity. Their strength may not necessarily come from coercive authority but from their ability to establish relationships with community members.
- From a peacebuilding perspective, this is important because societal peace requires more than the absence of violence. It requires relationships characterised by trust, cooperation, participation and mechanisms through which disagreements can be addressed constructively.
- One participant's perception can therefore be interpreted as reflecting the belief that:
- NGOs are closer to the people and therefore better positioned to understand community problems and mobilise people to resolve them.
- The finding positions NGOs as potential bridging institutions between communities and formal institutions.

Government as a Critical but Less Dominant Peacebuilding Actor:

- Although NGOs received the highest proportion, 22% of respondents identified government as having the greatest capacity to build societal peace.
- This finding should not be interpreted as evidence that government is unimportant. Rather, it demonstrates recognition of the distinctive institutional capacity possessed by the state.
- Government has formal authority, legal mandates, administrative structures and responsibility for maintaining law and order. It can formulate policies, enforce legislation, coordinate public services and establish mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution.



- The relatively lower percentage may therefore reflect a perception that government interventions are sometimes more formal or distant from everyday community interactions than those of NGOs.
- Nevertheless, government remains indispensable to sustainable peacebuilding. NGOs can facilitate dialogue and community mobilisation, but they generally cannot substitute for the legal, institutional and regulatory functions of government.
- The finding therefore points towards complementarity rather than competition between government and NGOs.

Communities as Owners of Sustainable Peace:

- An important and relatively unexpected finding is that 21% of respondents identified community members as having the greatest responsibility and capacity for building societal peace.
- This finding challenges approaches that conceptualise communities primarily as beneficiaries of peacebuilding interventions.
- Instead, participants recognised communities as peacebuilding agents.
- This is theoretically important because sustainable peace cannot simply be delivered to communities by external actors. Peace must ultimately be internalised and sustained by the people who live within the community.
- Community members understand local histories, relationships, grievances, cultural practices and sources of tension. They are therefore often able to identify conflict dynamics that external institutions may not immediately recognise.
- The finding supports the principle that peacebuilding should be locally owned and participatory.
- Consequently, NGOs should not position themselves as the "builders of peace" while treating community members as passive beneficiaries. Their role should increasingly be to facilitate, strengthen and institutionalise communities' own peacebuilding capacities.



Comparative Interpretation of the Findings:

S/N	Actor	Percentage	Interpretation
1	NGO	57%	Perceived as having the strongest practical capacity to facilitate peace
2	Government	22%	Recognised for formal authority and institutional capacity
3	Community Members	21%	Recognised as critical owners and sustainers of peace
TOTAL		100%	

The results reveal that respondents did not perceive peacebuilding as the exclusive responsibility of one institution.

Instead, the findings suggest three complementary forms of capacity namely; -

- NGOs → relational and facilitative capacity.
- Government → institutional and regulatory capacity.
- Communities → local ownership and sustainability capacity.

This provides an important conceptual insight for peacebuilding practice in Kamuli District.

IV. Discussion

The finding that 57% of respondents perceived NGOs as having the greatest capacity to build societal peace provides support for the argument that civil society organisations can play an important role in peacebuilding.

NGOs often have greater operational flexibility than government institutions and can establish sustained relationships with community groups. Their interventions can create spaces for dialogue, participation and collective problem-solving.

However, the findings also caution against placing excessive responsibility on NGOs. The combined perception of government and community members accounts for 43%



of respondents. This is substantial and demonstrates that nearly half of the participants did not consider NGOs to be the primary peacebuilding actor.

This has an important implication that NGO effectiveness in peacebuilding depends partly on the institutional environment in which NGOs operate and the extent to which communities participate in peace processes.

The results can therefore be interpreted through a transformative peacebuilding perspective. Peacebuilding is not simply about resolving individual disputes; it involves transforming relationships, structures and patterns that produce or reproduce conflict. From this perspective, NGOs can contribute to Peacebuilding by: -

- strengthening dialogue;
- empowering marginalised groups;
- facilitating community participation;
- promoting social cohesion;
- addressing socioeconomic vulnerabilities;
- linking communities with government structures; and
- strengthening local conflict-resolution mechanisms.

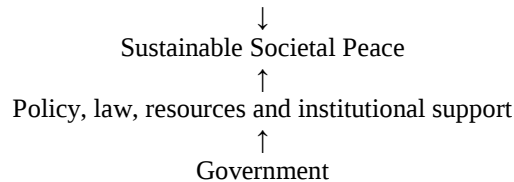
Government, meanwhile, can provide the institutional framework necessary for these processes to become sustainable.

Communities provide the local legitimacy and ownership required for peacebuilding interventions to endure.

A Proposed Conceptual Interpretation:

The findings support a three-actor peacebuilding model, that is; -





This model suggests that NGOs should not replace government or communities. Instead, they should operate as facilitators and connectors within a broader peacebuilding ecosystem.

The unique Contribution to Theory:

- The study contributes to peacebuilding theory by challenging a simplistic binary between state-led peacebuilding and community-led peacebuilding.
- The findings introduce the possibility of understanding NGO peacebuilding capacity through three dimensions:

Relational capacity:

NGOs possess the ability to build relationships and create spaces for interaction among community actors.

Institutional Capacity:

Government possesses formal authority, policy mechanisms and institutional resources necessary for maintaining peace.

Local ownership Capacity:

- Communities possess contextual knowledge, legitimacy and the ability to sustain peace beyond the lifespan of externally funded projects.
- The study therefore proposes that societal peace emerges most sustainably when relational, institutional and local capacities interact.

Implications for NGO practice;

The findings have several implications for NGOs operating in Kamuli District, that is;

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- In the first place, NGOs should strengthen internal peacebuilding capacity:



- Then secondly, NGOs should move from "doing peacebuilding for communities" to "building peace with communities."
- The 21% community response demonstrates that community members should be recognised as active peacebuilders rather than passive beneficiaries.
- Thirdly, NGOPs should strengthen collaboration with Government:
- The 22% government response demonstrates that communities recognise the importance of formal institutions. NGOs should therefore establish stronger relationships with local government structures.
- Fourthly, Peacebuilding should be integrated into development programming:
- Livelihoods, education, gender programmes, youth interventions, governance, community mobilisation and social protection can all create opportunities for strengthening peaceful relationships.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that:

- NGOs should strengthen their institutional peacebuilding capacity through staff training in conflict analysis, mediation, negotiation, dialogue and conflict-sensitive programming.
- NGOs should establish internal conflict-management systems to ensure that organisational conflicts do not undermine their external peacebuilding legitimacy.
- Community members should be recognised as peacebuilding partners, rather than merely beneficiaries of NGO interventions.
- NGOs and local government should develop joint peacebuilding initiatives that combine NGO community-level access with government institutional authority.
- Participatory peacebuilding mechanisms should be strengthened so that women, youth, local leaders and other community groups can participate in decisions affecting social cohesion.
- Peacebuilding should be integrated into NGO development programmes, particularly programmes addressing livelihoods, governance, gender, youth and community empowerment.
- Future research should examine whether NGOs' perceived peacebuilding capacity translates into measurable peacebuilding outcomes, rather than relying solely on perceptions.



V. Conclusion

This study examined perceptions of the capacity of NGOs to build societal peace among 45 participants drawn from three NGOs in Kamuli District. The findings demonstrate that 57% of respondents perceived NGOs as having the greatest capacity to build societal peace, while 22% identified government and 21% identified community members.

The dominance of NGOs in the responses indicates strong community recognition of their role as accessible, participatory and community-oriented peacebuilding actors. However, the findings also demonstrate that NGOs cannot build sustainable peace independently.

Government provides institutional authority, legal frameworks and public structures, while communities provide local ownership, legitimacy and sustainability. The central argument emerging from the study is therefore that NGOs may be perceived as the strongest immediate facilitators of societal peace, but sustainable peace requires the combined capacities of NGOs, government and communities.

The study consequently proposes a shift from viewing peacebuilding as the responsibility of a single actor towards understanding it as a collaborative societal process. In Kamuli District, NGOs have considerable potential to serve as catalysts for peace, but their effectiveness will be greatest when their efforts are connected to responsive government institutions and empowered communities.

In short according to the findings, NGOs may facilitate peace, government may institutionalise peace, but communities must ultimately own and sustain peace.

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