Exploring Conflict Resolution Mechanisms among the Gumuz and the non-Gumuz communities in Metekel zone of Benishangul Gumuz Region, Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study was intended to examine conflict resolution mechanisms among the Gumuz and the non-Gumuz communities (the Amhara, Oromo and Agew) currently inhabiting in the Metekel zone of Benishangul Gumuz Region since 1990s to present. Employing a qualitative research approach, data was collected using Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with traditional leaders, community elders, government officials, legal experts, civil society representatives, and members of conflict-affected communities. The findings indicate that legal pluralism has long been exercised, where both the state-run and local institutions of conflict resolution are operational to handle the intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic conflicts. Customary methods are predominantly used for managing intra-ethnic conflicts, mainly among the Gumuz community, while inter-ethnic conflicts tend to be managed through state-led processes. The customary conflict resolution mechanisms have not yet fully realized their potentials in both shaping the shared future and nurturing durable peace. Efforts towards conflict resolution in the area have predominantly relied on formal approaches using state structures and authority, with limited efficacy in terms of conflict resolution and peace-building outcomes. The study suggests instituting a more integrated approach of both apparatuses, and yet essentially builds on the existing customary practices would help immensely to ensure a self-regulating peace. Harnessing traditional

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practices with formal strategies would provide a more comprehensive and effective strategy to achieve sustainable peace in the Metekel zone.

Keywords: Conflict Resolution; State-run Institutions; Inter-ethnic Conflict; Peacebuilding; Gumuz

1. Introduction

Conflict resolution practices are fundamental mechanisms employed by societies to address quite numerous incompatibilities and maintain social order (Bercovitch et al., 2009; Goldberg et al., 2020). These practices, either deeply rooted in tradition or in the state legal systems, play crucial roles in resolving conflicts ranging from interpersonal disputes to larger communal and inter-ethnic tensions. While customary practices are often steeped in cultural norms and traditions, state run institutions typically operate within the framework of formal legal systems (Johnson et al., 2021). In many societies, customary conflict resolution practices predate the establishment of formal state institutions but continue to co-exist in a state of mutual influence (Griffiths, 1986; Paalo and Issifu, 2021). These customary practices are often characterized by their accessibility, flexibility, and emphasis on community participation. In contrast, state-run conflict resolution mechanisms are typically codified within legal frameworks and oversaw by state institutions

In fact, sometimes cases of such type might need strong backing as well as strict obedience of state laws, statutes, and specific legal producers. This is for the obvious reason that both the monopoly of violence and the duty of law enforcement are vested in the state. Such cases are often prevalent in inter-ethnic conflict. In view of such overlapping nature, for instance, as stipulated in article 63 of the revised constitution of the Afar regional state in 1999, the regional administration institutes the council of elders at different levels (Sansculotte-Greenidge, Kwesi & Demessie Fantaye, 2012:95). This suggests among other that the local and state-run conflict resolution have functioned as complementing

each other, albeit the ultimate decision-making remains on the state-run institutions.

Ethiopia's complex political landscape has been fraught with inter-ethnic tensions and manifested conflicts, often stem from historical grievances, stiff competition over resources, and marginalization of various sorts (Aalen, 2002; Abbink, 2005). The diverse ethnic groups constituting Federal Ethiopia are allowed to use their distinct language and granted with constitutional protection to deepen their own cultural values together with esteemed identities. While exercising these wide-ranging freedoms, inter-ethnic conflicts have become pervasive fighting over the use of natural resources and the issue of political representation in regional and local government (Horowitz, 1985; Tripp, 2003). This was for the most part prevalent following the political reforms since 1990s; Ethiopia was officially transformed from a unitary to a federal state structure. As many scholars argued, if not assumed to be the underlying cause, the new federal system remains to be the permissive factor for inter-ethnic conflicts. Many of inter-ethnic conflicts have been exacerbated by factors such as policies of ethnic balancing, competition for political power, and lack of coherent inter-governmental cooperation among the regional states (Clapham, 2002; Lyons, 2006).

In response to these challenges, Ethiopia has employed a range of conflict resolution mechanisms, blending formal and informal approaches (Keller et al., 2015). Formal mechanisms include the judiciary, arbitration, and mediation through government institutions and legal frameworks (Fiseha, 2014). Local dispute resolution practices, community dialogues, and reconciliation ceremonies play significant roles, drawing upon indigenous conflict resolution methods ingrained within Ethiopian cultures (Tadesse, 2012). Additionally, efforts have been made to engage civil society organizations, religious leaders, and international mediators to facilitate dialogue and reconciliation processes (Rettberg, 2016). Despite such efforts

challenges remain, including mistrust between ethnic groups, political polarization, and lack of inclusive and sustainable peacebuilding strategies (Betsi & van der Linde, 2019).

In many contexts, successful conflict resolution depends on a blend of formal and informal mechanisms, tailored to the specific needs and dynamics of the situation (Bercovitch et al., 2009; Ejere et al., 2021; Wallensteen & Svensson, 2014). Often, traditional conflict resolution demands rebuilding trust, fostering communication, and mending relationships, and in doing so, addressing the underlying issues that fuel tensions (Galtung, 1996; Lederach, 1997). Moreover, inclusivity, transparency, and accountability are vital principles for ensuring the legitimacy and sustainability of resolution processes (Fisher et al., 2000; Avruch et al., 2001). Effective conflict resolution mechanisms facilitate dialogue, promote understanding, generate mutually acceptable solutions, and ultimately contributing to long-term peace and stability in many societies (Ramsbotham et al., 2011; Kriesberg, 2014).

Understanding the intricate dynamics that exist between customary and state-run conflict resolution institutions is pivotal for harnessing effective strategies aimed at addressing local conflicts and fostering sustainable peace. Metekel Zone of Benishangul-Gumuz Region is among tension-ridden areas; wherein mutual suspension so prevalent among various ethnic groups due to the historical grievances, competition over resources, and the perceived fear of political marginalization. Article 2 of the 2007 Revised Constitution of the Regional State of Benishangul-Gumuz endorsed that the proprietorship of the region is vested on the following five ethnic groups of Berta, Gumuz, Shinasha, Mao and Komo, even though the region is also inhabited by people from other ethnic groups The regional constitution was revised in 2002, three years before the most contentious national election that held in 2005, and it has legitimized the possession rights of the five ethnic groups, which thereby literally disenfranchising others

(at least on the perception level) from political participation. This has contributed to the ongoing conflict in Metekel area, which manifested in many dimensions and quite several forms, ranging from disputes over natural resources (mainly land, water, and forests) to conflicts related to political representation and economic opportunities. The revised constitution seemed to have hefted the mutual suspense of different groups, which in effect, the customary mechanisms hardly secure enough spaces to umpire cross-cutting issues.

Several studies conducted in different parts of Ethiopia have examined the causes of conflicts, the actors involved, and the prospects for sustainable peace peace (e.g., Gebre, 2004; Boku and Gufu, 2009; Mesfin, 2011; Gebre, 2012; Yonas, 2014; Fekadu, 2017; Dagnachew, 2018; McPeak and Little, 2018). Others have investigated customary and formal conflict resolution mechanisms (see Mengistu, 2016; Zenebe, 2016; Lemessa, 2021; Mohammed, 2021; Bekele, 2022). While these studies provide valuable insights into traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, they often tended to romanticize their roles by creating functional equivalence to the state-run institutions. Therefore, a nuanced understanding of both local community and formal state-run conflict resolution mechanisms is imperative.

This study is aimed to explore these local conflict resolution mechanisms in Metekel Zone and provide insights for fostering contextually appropriate approaches to conflict resolution in the area.

2. Brief Literature Review

This literature review synthesizes key scholarly works examining the complexities of customary and state approaches to conflict resolution within the context of ethnic tensions. Customary and state-run conflict resolution practices play pivotal roles in managing and mitigating ethnic conflicts, which often arise from deep-rooted historical grievances, identity politics, and competition over resources and power. Studies by Mamdani (1996) and Anderson (1983) provide historical

insights into the formation and perpetuation of ethnic identities and conflicts. These works illuminate how colonial legacies, state-building processes, and nationalist movements have shaped ethnic relations and influenced conflict dynamics. Research by Tamanaha (2008) on legal pluralism and ethnic conflict resolution explores how customary and state legal systems interact and compete in addressing ethnic disputes. Additionally, Rothchild and Roeder's (2005) study on institutional design for conflict management examines the role of formal institutions, informal practices, and power-sharing arrangements in ethnic conflict resolution.

On the other hand, Assefa (2003) and Galtung (1996) delve into indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms and the role of traditional leaders, elders, and customary laws in mediating ethnic conflicts. These studies highlight the importance of community-based approaches, cultural sensitivity, and consensus-building in fostering reconciliation and peace. Scholars like Lijphart (1977) and Horowitz (1985) have analyzed state-led strategies for managing ethnic conflicts, including federalism, decentralization, and minority rights protection. In their studies, they assessed the effectiveness of institutional mechanisms, such as power-sharing agreements and affirmative action policies, in addressing ethnic grievances and promoting social cohesion.

Literature on legal pluralism and ethnic justice (see Benda-Beckmann, 2007) examines the coexistence of customary and state legal systems in ethnically diverse societies. Their study sheds light on the complexities of navigating legal landscapes shaped by multiple normative frameworks. According to Merry (1988), the tensions that often arise between formal laws established by the state and the customary practices are deeply rooted in local traditions and cultural norms. Through in-depth ethnographic research, shed unpacks how these tensions manifest in everyday legal encounters and the strategies individuals employ to navigate the complexities of legal pluralism. Similarly, Griffiths' work offers critical insights into the dynamics of

legal pluralism, particularly in the context of ethnically diverse societies. He explores the interface between formal legal institutions and indigenous legal norms, examining how these two systems interact and influence each other and highlights on the challenges and opportunities inherent in efforts to integrate customary legal practices into state legal frameworks. These studies contribute to the understanding of how legal pluralism shapes notions of justice, rights, and citizenship in ethnically diverse contexts, offering valuable insights for policymakers, legal practitioners, and scholars alike

Previous studies (e.g. Brahimi, 2000; Lederach, 1997; Montville, 1990) on ethnic conflict resolution identify various challenges, such as political polarization, historical traumas, and external interventions, which hinder peacebuilding efforts. Furthermore, Lederach (1997) and Paris (2004), emphasize the opportunities for dialogue, reconciliation, and sustainable development through inclusive governance, interethnic dialogue, and community-based initiatives. In conclusion, the literature on conflict resolution practices about inter-ethnic conflicts underscores the complexities of addressing deeply entrenched divisions and promoting sustainable peace. By drawing upon indigenous wisdom, legal pluralism, and inclusive governance, societies can develop contextually appropriate strategies for managing inter-ethnic tensions and building resilient mechanisms for conflict resolution.

3. Methodology
3.1 Description of the Study Area
The study was conducted in Metekel zone, one of three administrative divisions within the Benishangul Gumuz Region (BGR) of Ethiopia. Positioned in the western region of the country, Metekel shares its boundaries with the North Gondar zone to the north, the Khamashi zone to the south and southwest, the Awi zone to the east, and Sudan to the west. It has an estimated population of 1,251,000, with females constituting approximately 49.2% of the total populace (CSA, 2023). The area is characterized by abundant arable land, diverse vegetation

exhibiting rich biodiversity, and consistent access to perennial water resources. The area is renowned for its varied mineral reserves, notably including deposits of gold and marble. Inhabited by a diverse range of ethnic groups, Metekel zone hosts diverse ethnic communities such as the Gumuz, Agew, Berta, Shinasha, Mao, Amhara, and Oromo, each contributing to the region's cultural diversity.
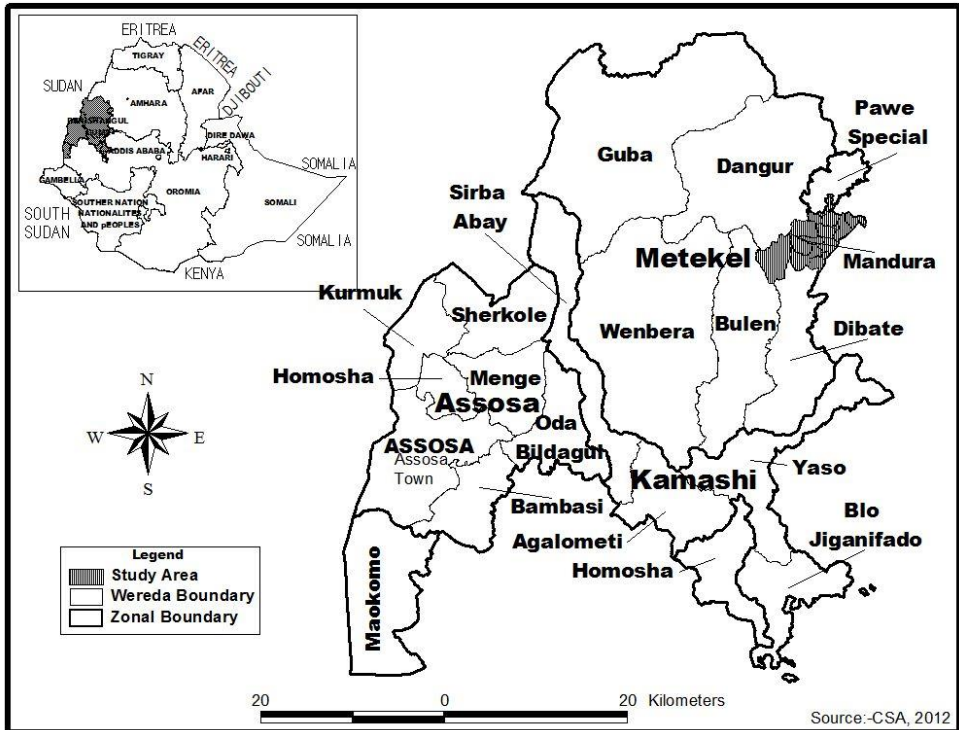

Figure 1: Location of Metekel zone in Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State

3.2 Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed a qualitative approach to examine conflict resolution mechanisms in Metekel zone, focusing on customary and state conflict resolution practices to ethnic conflicts. The study was founded on a comprehensive review of the literature on customary and

formal conflict resolution practices, ethnic conflicts, legal pluralism, and peacebuilding.

Both primary and secondary data were used for the study. Primary data were obtained through key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs), and secondary data were collected from documents and archival records. A combination of judgment along with the snowballing guided sampling techniques were employed to select participants of the KIIs and FGDs. A total of 24 KIIs were conducted with key stakeholders involved in both customary and state conflict resolution processes, including traditional leaders, community elders, government officials, legal experts, civil society representatives, and members of conflict-affected communities. The KIIs provided rich, detailed insights into individuals' perspectives, experiences, and perceptions regarding the effectiveness, strengths, and limitations of customary and state mechanisms in addressing ethnic conflicts. In addition, 4 FGDs were carried out comprising of participants from mixed groups, including adults, women, and the youth. The FGDs were conducted by bring together small groups (eight participants in each FGD) of participants from diverse backgrounds to discuss specific topics related to conflict resolution practices. The discussions encouraged interaction, dialogue, and exchange of views among participants, allowing them to explore shared beliefs, norms, and values shaping customary and state approaches to conflict management and resolution. The FGDs were particularly useful for capturing collective opinions, identifying common themes, and uncovering underlying social dynamics within communities.

Data analysis involves a systematic process of data organization and deriving meaningful insights. Initially, the collected data is transcribed verbatim and thematically organized for analysis, which involves carefully reviewing each transcript to identify key themes and patterns that emerge from the responses. Furthermore, the analysis explored the contextual factors and nuances that shape the perspectives and

experiences of the participants, considering the socio-cultural, political, and economic dynamics that influence conflict resolution mechanisms and peacebuilding efforts in the study area. The diverse datasets obtained all through the application of different tools were triangulated to enhance the validity and reliability of the analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the key findings of the study examining conflict resolution mechanisms within the Metekel zone. It provides valuable insights into both customary and formal approaches to conflict resolution, situating these findings within existing literature. Furthermore, it discusses the implications for policy and practice as well as for future research, enriching the discourse on conflict resolution mechanisms.

Overview of Conflicts in Metekel zone

The conflict in the Metekel area prior to 1991 was marked by persistent tensions, primarily driven by disputes over resource use, particularly land and minerals, compounded by historical grievances and ethnic rivalries. Skirmishes between the Gumuz people and neighboring communities date back to as early as 1952, resulting in causalities and property damage. According to key informants, inhabitants of the *Dech Lombia* area, led by a Gumuz warrior named *Lemmocha*, launched a significant attack against non-Gumuz communities. However, this confrontation was not as intense as the one that devastated the area in 1966.

The 1966 conflict, known locally as the *Gasasi* War, began in the hamlet of *Gungua* and lasted nearly nine months. The war was not only devastating in terms of battle-related deaths but also had a long-lasting impact, with the memory of the conflict continuing to affect intercommunal relations in Metekel. Another major source of conflict in the Metekel zone has been border disputes, which have intensified since 1991. A local informant described the grim episode as "In a tragic

event, a prominent individual from the Gumuz community was accidentally shot and killed. As a reprisal, the Gumuz gunmen unleashed their fury, resulting in the death of 53 individuals and numerous injured in a Salam Kebele. The violence spread to several other areas soon later, including Deq villages of number 134, 131, 49, 127, 46, and 5. Another distressing incident occurred in village 49 where regional officials returning from fieldwork were brutally killed with machetes and gunshots. This had led to the eruption of widespread clashes involving 40 members of government security forces and civilians from Pawi Woreda, Alum town and other neighboring kebeles, of Amhara regional State" (KII 13, 2022).

It was after such a shocking episode that the Regional state of Benishangul Gumuz has imposed the state of emergency, and shortly after the regional state deeded to shift its capital from Pawi (a town within Metekl) to Assosa. This by itself was valid testimony that resonates to what extent was the conflict so pervasive and lingering in Metekel area.

Since 1991, the area has been plagued by numerous causes of conflict, with resource utilization remaining a primary driver. Large-scale logging operations, often benefiting external investors rather than local communities, have exacerbated tensions and contributed to the ongoing conflicts. Additionally, border disputes have intensified as local political figures vie for territorial expansion, further fuelling inter-ethnic tensions and violence. As stated in the sections above, the Federal structure instituted in 1995 has granted the Regional States to formulate their constitution of operation within the territories of the region. Some of them were found to contradict the overall orientations and spirits of the 1995 FDRE constitution. The constitution of Benishangul Gumuz region was among the most criticized for recognizing only five ethnic groups as indigenous communities and considering other ethnic groups inhabiting the region as as aliens. This underscores the politics of inclusion and exclusion at the heart of the

inter-ethnic conflict in the area. Consequently, Metekel zone has been plagued by numerous causes of conflict, mainly disputes over access to and ownership of resources.

Following political reforms in 2018, inquiries about the governance structure of the Metekel zone have intensified, with conflicts intensifying between the politically dominant Gumuz and non-indigenous ethnic groups. The displacement of non-indigenous groups has further escalated tensions, with Amhara elites advocating for the return of the Metekel zone to the Amhara region. Propaganda campaigns, such as the call for ethnic Gumuz to defend their community, have further polarized the conflict, leading to the dissolution of local government administration in many areas. Both Gumuz and non-indigenous communities have mobilized paramilitary forces, exacerbating the cycle of violence and displacement.

Overall, the conflict in the Metekel area reflects a complex interplay of historical grievances, resource disputes, and ethnic rivalries, exacerbated by political and economic factors. Addressing these root causes and fostering inclusive governance and dialogue is crucial for mitigating tensions and achieving sustainable peace in the region.

Conflict Resolution Mechanisms
Customary conflict resolution mechanisms
In Metekel, the traditional intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic conflict resolution mechanisms among the Amhara, Awi, and Gumuz communities are deeply rooted in the cultural traditions and communal practices of the respective ethnic groups. Each community has its unique approaches, yet there are common elements that underline their methods of conflict resolution.

Among the Amhara community, conflict resolution typically involves the intervention of respected elders or community leaders. These elders, known for their wisdom and impartiality, act as mediators between conflicting parties. They facilitate dialogue, listen to grievances, and

work towards finding mutually acceptable solutions. The process often emphasizes the restoration of harmony and the maintenance of social order within the community. Similarly, the Awi community relies on the wisdom and guidance of elders in resolving intra-ethnic conflicts. Elders play a central role in mediating disputes and promoting reconciliation between parties. They employ traditional methods of negotiation and consensus-building to address grievances and restore peace. Rituals and ceremonies may also be employed to symbolize the resolution of conflict and the strengthening of community bonds. The Gumuz community, too, places great emphasis on the role of elders in conflict resolution. These elders, revered for their experience and knowledge, facilitate discussions and negotiations between conflicting parties. They draw upon traditional customs and rituals to promote reconciliation and restore balance within the community. Rituals such as animal sacrifices, blessings, and communal feasts are often used to signify the resolution of conflict and the restoration of harmony.

Despite differences in specific practices, all three communities share a common commitment to resolving conflicts through dialogue, mediation, and reconciliation. They recognize the importance of preserving social cohesion and maintaining peaceful coexistence. Through their traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, they strive to uphold cultural values, promote understanding, and foster unity within the community contributing to resolving conflicts. Similar studies on customary conflict resolution mechanisms reveal parallel practices. For instance, Mengistie (2022) studied traditional conflict resolution between Awi and Gumuz communities and found out that the elder council or shimigilina is well recognized, accepted and respected by both communities as a vital and effective conflict resolution mechanism. The Gadaa system, a traditional socio-political system of the Oromo people, incorporates elders in the conflict resolution process. The Gadaa system's council of elders plays a crucial role in mediating disputes and ensuring community cohesion (Debisa, 2022). In the Somali community, the Xeer system, a traditional legal system, also

utilizes elders as mediators. The Xeer emphasizes dialogue and negotiation, aiming to restore relationships and social equilibrium after conflicts (Abdile, 2012). Similarly, in the Shona community of Zimbabwe, traditional conflict resolution involves the "Dare," a council of elders who mediate disputes and encourage reconciliation among parties, a system that underscores the importance of restoring social harmony and avoiding future conflicts (Loveness and Mathew, 2017).

Formal Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

In Ethiopia's Metekel Zone, traditional dispute resolution methods remain prevalent. However, the growing importance of formal justice institutions, such as courts, police arbitration panels, and district harmony committees, in resolving conflicts within the region is noteworthy. Nevertheless, challenges related to capacity constraints and localization issues can hinder their effectiveness and erode public trust.

Formal court adjudication serves as a cornerstone of both inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflict resolution in the Metekel area. This hierarchical system extends from Ethiopia's Supreme Court down to local zone courts, handling a wide range of disputes, from civil matters to criminal cases. In urban centers like Gilgel Beles and Wombera, these courts address diverse cases, from minor thefts to serious felonies. Local tribal elders often provide interpretation services, bridging linguistic gaps and ensuring understanding of court proceedings. However, linguistic diversity, legislative backlogs, and geographic barriers can impede access and enforcement, leading to concerns about governmental control among marginalized groups.

Despite the official oversight, numerous challenges persist, especially in agrarian communities. These hurdles include limited geographic access, linguistic barriers faced by transferred judges, case backlogs leading to significant delays, high legal fees inhibiting access for the impoverished, tension between legal proceedings and traditional

community values, and concerns about equity and bias favoritism. Mutuku et al. (2022) identified similar challenges in Kenya's justice system, especially with land disputes. These include distrust in the courts, delays, and corruption such as bribery, abuse of office, and absenteeism among officials.

In rural areas of Metekel, local law enforcement often intervenes to mediate community disputes involving minor offenses, property damage, land disputes, and livestock theft. In the absence of accessible courts, police may impose fines for misdemeanours. However, their informal approach to conflict resolution, lacking standardized training and due process, can result in inconsistent outcomes and may be perceived as biased by minority groups.

In an effort to enhance access to justice, Peace Committees have been established in Metekel's woredas. Comprising elders, religious leaders, and administrators, these committees aim to resolve disputes using traditional norms and practices. While they occasionally succeed in easing tensions, challenges such as political interference in member selection, inadequate training, discrimination against elderly participants, and resource limitations hamper their effectiveness.

During periods of heightened community discord, authorities have organized large-scale peace assemblies in Metekel, bringing together respected elders, spiritual leaders, and youth representatives from opposing factions. While some assemblies have led to de-escalation and localized peace agreements, critics argue that these top-down approaches lack grassroots engagement needed for sustainable solutions and are often viewed as mere public relations exercises. In this regard, Kenee (2022) highlighted that sustained community dialogue needs to be part of political reform to build lasting peace.

Towards Sustainable Peacebuilding in Metekel zone
Sustainable peacebuilding initiatives in the study area, amongst others, should involve local communities, including traditional and religious

leaders, women, and the youth. This section discusses the potential contributions of three important segments of the community to sustainable peacebuilding in the area.

Role of Faith-based Institutions
Religious authorities and organizations in Ethiopia's Metekel Zone play a crucial role in promoting peace and harmony among local communities. Muslim leaders, such as sheikhs, imams, and sharia court judges, advocate for social justice and togetherness, promoting moderation among the young and harmony among the elderly. However, moderate Muslims may face challenges due to strict interpretations of Islamist ideology.

Conversations with religious leaders in Metekel underscore the substantial moral influence wielded by well-known members of the Muslim community, such as sheiks, imams, and judges of sharia courts. These leaders make public pleas for peace and constructive discourse during times of communal unrest, grounded in Islamic ideals of social justice and togetherness. During group prayers conducted by Imams, the idea of humanity's common identity under Allah is highlighted. Based on Islamic principles, Imams also promote moderation among youth and harmony among the elderly. Furthermore, Muslims support ecumenical and peace efforts with their zakat payments; nonetheless, moderate Muslims who wish to foster diversity and understanding may encounter difficulties due to some strict interpretations of Islamist ideology.

In a similar vein, conversations with religious authorities highlight the tiny but significant influence that Orthodox Christianity has in some parts of Metekel. Clergy members provide communities facing conflict with spiritual assistance based on principles of love, forgiveness, and acceptance. During turbulent times, monasteries provide refuge to vulnerable populations, while prayer meetings at churches promote interreligious discourse aimed at promoting peace. Churches also carry

out traditional reconciliation traditions, giving these procedures a greater meaning. Evangelical influences can cause friction in non-Christian cultures, and conservative views on gender roles in Orthodox Christianity might hinder the advancement of women into leadership positions.

The Gumuz indigenous belief system is based on clan deities, communal rites, and taboos that perpetuate societal hierarchy. Traditional reconciliation traditions including goro, shimglina, and debo rely on ancestral spirits and clan loyalties, with spiritual leaders known as kuala acting as liaisons between elders and deities. Oral histories inherent in Gumuz culture both reinforce their identity and help to promote peace. However, the influence of industrialization has caused younger generations to challenge old standards, reducing their loyalty during times of turmoil.

Recognizing the enormous significance of religion leaders from Islam, Christianity, and Gumuz spirituality, coordinated initiatives to promote peace in the Metekel Zone may capitalize on their ethical authority and networks. Interfaith conversations about shared moral principles, coupled with training sessions on mediation and trauma recovery, and coordinated public pronouncements against violence may all contribute to promote tolerance, social cohesion, and reconciliation across religious lines. Promoting collaborative young alliances within religious groups also aids in intergenerational transition. Regardless of the problems that exist, cultivating a feeling of universal solidarity while listening to the needs of the underprivileged creates the groundwork for mutual understanding and regional peacebuilding.

Women Participation and Empowerment
The role of women in conflict resolution has emerged as a critical yet underexplored dimension of peacebuilding efforts (Smith & Johnson, 2023). While traditional narratives portray women primarily as victims

of conflict, recent research has highlighted their agency and resilience in promoting peace and reconciliation within their communities.

It is widely recognized that women play a vital role in conflict prevention and resolution. Engaged in several social community networks such as savings assemblies, farming collectives, labor unions, and funeral societies, women bridge ethnic divides by collaborating on shared concerns such as income generation, healthcare, and mutual assistance. Their diverse roles afford them unique perspectives, allowing for early detection of conflict escalation and the initiation of preventive peace initiatives.

In the study area, during periods of escalating cycles of revenge, esteemed female leaders utilize their revered roles as community mothers to intervene and persuade warring factions to cease hostilities and embrace dialogue. A notable example occurred in 2020 when influential female leaders from the Awi and Amhara communities, alongside elders and spiritual figures, successfully mediated temporary tensions between feuding youth groups within the study area. Despite these interventions, the sustainability of peace remains precarious due to insufficient support mechanisms for such local conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives.

According to FGD participants, women in Gumuz society wield significant influence, capable of either mitigating or exacerbating conflicts, highlighting the pivotal role women play in shaping conflict dynamics within the community. Moreover, Awi women exhibit a similar degree of agency and influence within their society. They often serve as pillars of support within their families and communities, contributing to the maintenance of social cohesion and harmony. The experience in Metekel area highlights the potential role of women in conflict prevention and resolution. In this regard, women empowerment and participation in conflict resolution would significantly contribute to peacebuilding efforts in the area.

Mobilizing the Youth

In the study area, the youth represent both a significant challenge and an opportunity in relation to the prevalent inter-ethnic conflicts. Their involvement and perspectives can either exacerbate tensions or serve as a medium for reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts. Understanding the dynamics of youth engagement, grievances, and aspirations is crucial for effectively addressing the root causes of these conflicts and fostering sustainable peace. Hence, mobilizing youth for conflict resolution and peacebuilding is paramount for fostering stability and reconciliation.

Recognizing the pivotal role of youth in shaping the future of their communities, initiatives that should engage them in constructive dialogue, mediation, and advocacy efforts is crucial. According to interviewed key informants, the importance of establishing collaborative platforms where young people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds come together to discuss grievances, understand each other's perspectives, and brainstorm solutions to address underlying tensions. Furthermore, providing platforms for youth-led peacebuilding initiatives empowers them to take ownership of the peace process and become agents of positive change in their communities. In this regard, awareness creation through trainings can help the youth to develop constructive attitudes to advocate for sustainable peacebuilding efforts.

Without the existence of meaningful participation in societal development, the youth may become vulnerable to extremist narratives that fuel inter-ethnic conflicts. This underscores the need for targeted interventions aimed at providing job opportunities and community-building initiatives tailored to the specific needs and aspirations of the youth in the study area. As Lemessa (2021) noted, creating job opportunities, and implementing skills development programs that align with youth interests can provide sustainable alternatives for poor youngsters tempted by militant activities.

5. Conclusions

Sustainable peacebuilding initiatives in the study area necessitate the active engagement of local communities, encompassing traditional and religious leaders, women, and the youth. This inclusive approach fosters dialogue and reconciliation processes among diverse ethnic groups in Metekel, addressing historical grievances and nurturing mutual understanding. Encouraging initiatives that cultivate mutual respect, trust, and cooperation is essential for building a foundation of enduring peace.

To effectively address conflicts at the grassroots level, there is a critical need to strengthen local conflict resolution mechanisms such as customary courts and community mediation councils. Providing comprehensive training and support to local mediators and traditional leaders enhances their capacity to manage disputes peacefully. Conflict resolution in the Metekel area has predominantly relied on formal approaches using state structures and authority, but these have yielded limited success in conflict resolution and peace-building. Therefore, combining traditional practices with formal strategies would offer a more comprehensive and effective approach to achieving sustainable peace in the area. Additionally, investing in livelihood development programs is paramount to alleviate socio-economic inequalities and poverty, thereby empowering marginalized groups and promoting sustainable peace.

Moreover, active involvement of youth in peacebuilding activities, coupled with opportunities for education, skills training, and employment, is imperative. By empowering young people as catalysts for positive change and encouraging their active participation in community affairs, sustainable peace becomes achievable. Women's - participation in decision-making processes related to peace and security must also be promoted, alongside supporting initiatives combating gender-based violence and advocating for women's rights. Through collaboration with neighboring regions and countries, strengthening the

rule of law, promoting access to justice, and investing in peace education, Metekel can embark on a journey toward sustainable peace and contribute to broader efforts for regional stability and development.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no known conflicts of interest.

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