

Peacebuilding in Zimbabwe by Civil Society Organisations: New Approaches and Challenges

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Abstract

The study explores strategies such as grassroots and indigenous initiatives employed by civil society organisations (CSOs) in promoting peacebuilding owing to perceived and real risks of conflict, which threatens national security in Zimbabwe and also assesses the impact of informal peace infrastructure, analyses operational challenges and assesses the state-civil society engagements towards peacebuilding. A systematic review of 50 documents was conducted following the seven-step model of reviewing literature, and a qualitative thematic analysis of selected studies on diverse Zimbabwean contexts was conducted. Findings reveal that CSOs employ diverse innovative strategies, which include social entrepreneurship, restorative justice and indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) integration that enhance local ownership and conflict transformation. In addition, informal peace committees emerged as powerful and flexible, inclusive platforms fostering community empowerment despite limited formal recognition and resource constraints. However, there are persistent challenges, which include political interference, funding shortages, and mistrust between state and civil society

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actors, which hinder collaboration and scalability. While grassroots initiatives demonstrate positive impacts on social cohesion and reconciliation, formal transitional justice mechanisms often underperform due to political and institutional limitations. Hence, these findings underscore the critical role of indigenous and informal models within inclusive peacebuilding frameworks but highlight the need for strengthened institutional support and sustainable partnerships. Therefore, this study informs policymakers and practitioners by emphasising scalable, integrative approaches that leverage the local agency to advance sustainable peacebuilding in Zimbabwe and other comparable contexts.

Keywords: conflict management, security, peace, violence, inclusivity, innovation, scale, social enterprise

INTRODUCTION

Since its independence in 1980, Zimbabwe has survived recurrent conflicts that threaten the national security and well-being of the people (Rumutsa, 2025). Masunda and Hlatshwayo (2024) observe that the country experienced several conflicts: mass protests, social fragmentation, ethnic or tribal conflicts, and structural conflicts, which hampered national security, social cohesion and economic development. Chivasa (2022) and Murwira (2022) agree on the crucial point that peacebuilding efforts should be more inclusive of all people, from the grassroots level and community-based initiatives, than the traditional elite mode of conflict resolution orchestrated at state level or by donor-funded CSOs. They have the potential to unite all stakeholders from the grassroots and foster a sense of ownership for peacebuilding initiatives (Yingi, 2023). Chivasa (2022) reiterates that community-driven approaches have proved to be efficient in mitigating violence and promoting reconciliation from the grassroots level.

However, scholars like Jeffrey (2023) and Makwerere (2024) lament the difficulties CSOs face in achieving this. The challenges include political interference, polarisation of the society, resource shortages, and lack of or limited institutional support, legitimacy issues and donor biases. Additionally, Rumutsa (2025) says that there are numerous CSO-led initiatives, which include early warning mechanisms, social entrepreneurship, and indigenous mediation, but they lack the required comprehensiveness towards integration and scaling. Ndakaripa (2023) points to several challenges affecting CSOs, and these include constrained political space, a lack of legitimacy, and partisanship or donor biases. Nyamanhindi (2020) and Chidhawu (2024) posit that these challenges lead to fragmented peace efforts and a lack of comprehensive scaling of peace initiatives. This perpetuates the risk of situations relapsing into violence. By exploring the challenges faced by CSOs in navigating volatile political landscapes affecting the state-CSO collaborative potential, the study addresses the persistent gaps in the effectiveness and sustainability of civil society-led peacebuilding initiatives in Zimbabwe. Therefore, this study explores the innovative peacebuilding approaches by CSOs in Zimbabwe, examining their challenges and constraints in achieving sustainable peace. By looking into the theory and practice of peace and conflict, the role of civil society, the study examines emerging models and approaches to propose a sustainable framework for collaborative and inclusive approaches to conflict management, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. This also adds value by informing policy towards national security and conflict resolution, strategic planning. The study contributes to the understanding of peacebuilding, challenges and limitations encountered so far to map the way forward towards generating new knowledge and a model of sustainable peacebuilding, for example, from the findings of this study, designing a national peace and security architecture and

drafting a policy brief that may lead to government policy on peacebuilding adjustments.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This conceptual framework operationalises key concepts to understand how CSOs operate to overcome structural violence and foster positive peace. CSOs, encompassing a broad spectrum of non-governmental organisations NGOs, social movements, and community groups operating independently from government, are recognised as crucial actors in peacebuilding (Ncube, 2014). In this study, the concept of peacebuilding refers to the inclusive processes and activities aimed at establishing a durable peace by addressing the root causes of conflict and fostering reconciliation (Murwira, 2022). It involves implementing strategies such as conflict mapping and community-based interventions to create tailor-made solutions that empower local communities and foster ownership of peacebuilding outcomes (Masunda and Hlatshwayo, 2024).

The ultimate goal is to achieve peace, understood as a positive state beyond the mere absence of direct violence. This state is characterised by justice, equality, fulfilment of human rights, and the absence of structural violence (Musarurwa, 2022). Furthermore, conflict includes both direct and structural forms of violence, often exacerbated by insufficient legal frameworks and the marginalisation of specific groups. Conflict manifests in various forms, including political polarisation, economic instability, social fragmentation, and systemic injustices that undermine human security, social cohesion and equitable development. The transformational process of peacebuilding, therefore, requires multifaceted efforts by CSOs, which have the capacity to mediate among different groups of people and the government.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the conceptual framework identifies key variables and their interrelationships. In the context of peacebuilding, independent variables include CSO innovative strategies, which include grassroots initiatives, economic empowerment, social entrepreneurship, community mediation, and digital engagement and CSO characteristics such as organisational structure, financial sustainability, networking and advocacy. These factors influence outcomes through mediating variables, such as the extent of community engagement, the degree of conflict transformation to address the root causes and changing attitudes, and the effectiveness of capacity building. Eventually, these interconnected elements aim to achieve positive peace, characterised by the absence of structural violence, justice, equality, the fulfilment of human rights, harmonious coexistence, and sustainable development.

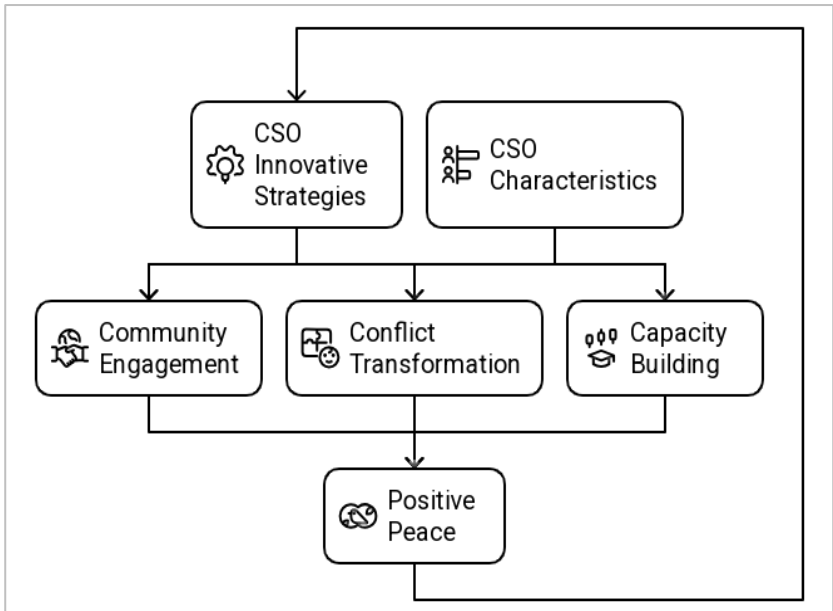


Figure 1: Key Variables and their Interrelationships in Peacebuilding

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on innovative peacebuilding approaches by CSOs in Zimbabwe has significantly evolved from 2014 to 2025. Early research explored CSOs' foundational roles during political coalitions and the emergence of informal peace committees (Chikwata, 2015), subsequently shifting focus to grassroots, indigenous, and action research-based interventions, emphasising locally driven strategies (Ndlovu, 2018). Contemporary approaches are now multifaceted, prioritising grassroots participation, indigenous knowledge, and collaborative frameworks that often complement or challenge state-led initiatives (Murwira, 2022). Key mechanisms in use include informal peace committees, social entrepreneurship, traditional justice, and restorative justice practices in addressing protracted socio-political conflicts (Masunda and Hlatshwayo, 2024).

Effective peacebuilding in Zimbabwe is anchored in informal peace committees (IPCs) and local peace infrastructures (LPIs). These grassroots mechanisms are important for community participation and social cohesion, and offer flexibility and diverse representation to fill in the gaps left by formal state structures (Makwerere, 2024). Despite facing recognition challenges, IPCs and LPIs empower communities and link peace with development (Chivasa and Harris, 2019). Indigenous peacebuilding approaches, leveraging IKS and traditional justice like *kuripa ngozi* (appeasing an avenging spirit), further contribute by addressing micro-conflicts through cultural values such as *Ubuntu*, ensuring local ownership and legitimacy (Mutanda, 2022).

The effectiveness of local actors is enhanced by capacity building for CSOs in peacebuilding, with training in conflict analysis and mediation, empowering them in complex environments (Dzinamarira *et al.*, 2024). Addressing past

conflicts requires transitional and restorative justice. While formal processes face political interference and funding issues, grassroots mediation facilitates truth-telling and healing, and restorative justice promotes dialogue (Mhandara, 2022). Innovative strategies like social entrepreneurship integrate economic initiatives with peacebuilding to foster cooperation and address grievances (Rumutsa, 2025). Combining these diverse, locally-driven approaches with strategic capacity building and economic models promises more sustainable peace outcomes.

Gender and inclusive peacebuilding, through informal structures, remains a vital focus, as informal peace infrastructures have significantly expanded opportunities for women's participation and minority representation. This actively challenges entrenched patriarchal norms and combats socio-political exclusion (Tshuma, 2022). While gender-sensitive training for traditional leaders and community actors actively promotes nonviolent masculinities and inclusive peace practices, the persistent challenges of pervasive patriarchy and complex political dynamics continue to impede the full realisation of gender inclusivity. The intricate collaboration and tensions between state and civil society actors reveal a delicate balance between potential partnerships and mutual suspicion. Makwerere (2024) observes that state-dominated local peace committees often suffer from partisanship, while CSO-led committees face accusations of harbouring "sinister agendas", which significantly limits effective cooperation. Calls for meaningful partnerships underscore the vital importance of bridging these divides to enhance the overall effectiveness of peace infrastructure at both national and local levels.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The objectives of the study include exploring the existing knowledge on innovative peacebuilding approaches by CSOs in

Zimbabwe, synthesising grassroots and indigenous approaches that contribute to inclusive peacebuilding initiatives, comparing the roles of state-led versus civil society-led peacebuilding initiatives and their collaborative capacities, and lastly deconstructing the challenges faced by CSOs in navigating complex, socio-political, and economic constraints. To achieve this, the study adopts a qualitative approach to synthesise peer-reviewed journal articles, empirical and systematic research published between 2014 and 2025. The inclusion criteria focused on recent studies with the twelve (12) year range addressing CSO-led peacebuilding initiatives in Zimbabwe. Other initiatives outside the domain of civil society were excluded. The review was conducted following the seven-step model. The initial search using keywords ‘civil’ ‘society’, ‘peace’, ‘peacebuilding’, ‘conflict’, ‘conflict transformation’, ‘innovative approaches/ models’, was conducted, resulting in 1 500 articles. Filtering to obtain full-text documents, with open access and focused on Zimbabwe, resulted in 199 documents, of which only 50 were actually targeted for relevance using Litmaps for citation chaining (snowballing). This final sample was deemed sufficient for thematic saturation and a comprehensive qualitative understanding of CSO-led initiatives. The obtained data were analysed through thematic and content analysis through the lenses of The Constructivist, Conflict Transformation Theory and Galtung’s peace theories, which specifically informed the interpretation of socially constructed peace and conflict as well as the categorisation of violence and peace types. The bias towards open access journal articles was necessitated by the need to counter data access challenges and the cost implications thereof, however not taking away from the rigour of data collection and analysis conducted and successfully arriving at a saturation point. The analysis resulted in exploration of the thematic areas, discussion of the findings, conclusion/recommendations and discussion of the proposed CSO peacebuilding model.

RESULTS

This section presents findings on a diverse range of local peacebuilding initiatives. The majority of the studies adopt the qualitative approach; action research, participatory action research, and case studies, focusing on peacebuilding initiatives, grassroots engagement, IKS, and informal peace infrastructures across various provinces in Zimbabwe. The comparative analysis helps to understand how CSOs strategise towards peacebuilding in a complex socio-political context, to assess the extent of their collaborative capacities with state actors, and to explore the challenges they face. The analysis also addresses the research questions on strategy, impact, and operational constraints.

A significant theme emerging from the review is the critical role of local agency and community-driven initiatives in fostering sustainable peace. Ncube (2014) underscores this by examining community-based early warning systems, highlighting their potential for proactive engagement in the prevention of violence through grassroots engagement. To complement this, Murwira (2022) focuses on bottom-up peacebuilding within coalition government frameworks, demonstrating how local participation can shape sustainable peace processes, especially in complex political contexts. To illustrate this further, Masunda and Hlatshwayo (2024) explore the diverse structures and functions of local peace committees, revealing how both CSOs and state actors adapt these mechanisms to local contexts, thereby grounding peace efforts within the communities they serve.

Innovative approaches are also key peacebuilding strategies. Rumutsa (2025) examines such approaches in peacebuilding, suggesting a future trajectory that prioritises adaptive and creative solutions to conflict. A good example is given by Mhandara (2024), who investigates social entrepreneurship as a powerful tool for fostering dialogue and economic

empowerment, recognising that economic stability is often intertwined with peace. Furthermore, Makwerere (2024) highlights the crucial integration of IKS with political intelligence, advocating for a holistic approach that respects local wisdom and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, thereby enriching and legitimising peacebuilding efforts from within. Another concept of endogenous relational peacebuilding is also introduced by Tshuma (2022), who focuses on the fundamental role of family and community ties in mending social tensions and bottom-up approaches to peacebuilding. Underpinned by Galtung's Peace Theory, this approach recognises that peace is not merely the absence of violence, but the presence of positive peace, inclusive approaches and healthy relationships. These studies show that peacebuilding is multi-faceted and constructivist in nature, because it is most effective when it is locally owned, culturally informed, and deeply relational.

There is also emphasis on grassroots and informal peacebuilding mechanisms. Chivasa (2023) portrays the critical role of IPCs in collaborative conflict prevention and peacebuilding. These committees are vital conduits for routine peacebuilding through informal social practices, thereby grounding peace efforts within the lived realities of the communities (Chivasa, 2022). This is crucial for transitional mediation and grassroots transitional justice mechanisms. This theme becomes dominant as Akande *et al.* (2021) also assess the efficacy of community-based peacebuilding in Zimbabwe. Thus, collectively, these studies affirm the power of local actors in fostering sustainable peace.

Transitional justice and reconciliation are also dominant emerging themes related to peacebuilding initiatives. Transitional justice advocates for hybrid frameworks that integrate both state and local approaches, emphasising local

ownership and participatory involvement in peacebuilding initiatives. Jeffrey (2023) highlights the necessity of such hybrid models, recognising that effective transitional justice must resonate with local contexts and traditional practices. The National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC) in Zimbabwe features prominently, with Ndakaripa (2023) assessing its effectiveness and Nyamanhindi (2020) analysing its healing and reconciliation policy, positioning it as an integrated national peace infrastructure (Dzinesa, 2022).

Capacity building, education, and youth empowerment are identified as foundational pillars for durable peace. Chivasa (2022) underscores the importance of capacity development training for CSO peacebuilders, a sentiment echoed by Dzinamarira *et al.* (2024) regarding institutional capacity building for new NGOs. Peace education, particularly in unstable environments (Makwanise and Masunda, 2024) and transformative peace education in secondary schools (Moyo, n.d.), is seen as crucial for cultivating a culture of peace. The role of youth is consistently emphasised, with Rukunu *et al.* ((2017) and Yingi (2023) showcasing youth empowerment programmes as effective peacebuilding tools, and Musarurwa (2021) demonstrating how social entrepreneurship can address structural violence affecting young people. Furthermore, Makore (2022) advocates for gender-transformative education for traditional leaders, highlighting the important role of education, gender, and traditional authority in peace processes.

IKS and traditional mechanisms in peacebuilding are another area showing the innovativeness of CSOs. Mutanda (2022) examines how traditional justice mechanisms foster social harmony, while Dzinesa (2022) specifically highlights the mediation role of traditional leaders in political conflict resolution, using traditional indigenous principles (*ubuntu* principles) such as *kuripa ngozi* in the Shona culture, which is

a strong application of mediation in transitional justice contexts. Moyo (2021) explores Ndebele spirituality as a resource for peace and healing, and Kiyala (2024) broadens this perspective by analysing African traditional peacebuilding worldviews and models, collectively arguing for the intrinsic value of culturally resonant approaches in conflict resolution. Traditional social structures and leadership prove to be a potent force for peacebuilding, conflict management and conflict transformation.

This review unearths a diverse array of innovative tools and methodologies employed in peacebuilding. These include the use of creative arts such as music and dance for conflict transformation and the strategic deployment of media. Chirunga and Mbwirire (2020) discuss the media's dual role, while Ndawana (2023) explores social media's impact on peacebuilding. In the Shona and Ndebele communities, dialogue platforms are championed for fostering ethnic cohesion and promoting political tolerance (Phillimon, n.d.). Nonviolent campaigns are analysed for their strategies and effectiveness, demonstrating alternative pathways to societal change. These varied approaches, alongside the critical role of CSOs and NGOs in partnerships for sustainable livelihoods (Mazorodze, 2024) and participatory peacebuilding evaluation (Chivasa, 2019), collectively illustrate a vibrant and evolving landscape of peacebuilding innovation, deeply rooted in local contexts and committed to inclusive, sustainable outcomes.

Effective peacebuilding is fundamentally anchored in local ownership and community-driven initiatives, fostering responsibility and sustainability. Research consistently highlights the success of genuinely community-led projects, such as the “Peace Rabbits Project” (Rumutsa, 2025) and autonomous community-initiated peace committees (Chivasa, 2022), which operate with significant local autonomy. This

bottom-up approach, reinforced by Chivasa (2019), emphasises participatory design tailored to specific community needs. Training and empowering community mediators directly invests in local capacity for conflict resolution (Mandikwaza, 2022). Crucially, effective grassroots engagement integrates IKS and traditional practices, with Mutanda (2022) highlighting traditional leaders' role in creating cultural spaces for peace and dispute resolution. Dzinesa (2022) discusses local compensation and cleansing ceremonies, while Moyo (2021) points to the *Ubuntu* philosophy. Morreira (2022) notes the use of local ceremonies to challenge gendered cultural scripts, indicating the transformative potential of adapting indigenous institutions for contemporary peacebuilding (Kiyala, 2024).

The success of these grassroots' efforts hinges on the inclusive participation of diverse community stakeholders. Mhandara (2024) notes strong involvement of local actors, including youth and women, a sentiment echoed by Tshuma (2022) regarding increased minority and women's participation. Chivasa (2023) highlights the formation of inclusive, gender-sensitive, and participatory local committees. Traditional leaders also emerge as key actors, engaging in dispute resolution and leveraging existing social leadership structures (Nyamanhindi, 2020; Mutanda, 2022). This is complemented by informal peace mechanisms, such as locally driven IPCs (Chivasa, 2022), serving as vital conflict prevention tools. Community empowerment and capacity building (Musarurwa, 2021) are crucial for sustaining peace efforts. Moreover, innovative approaches like participatory performing arts (Makwanise and Masunda, 2024), peace education (Moyo, 2021), and dialogue initiatives, among youth political rivals (Phillimon, n.d.), foster political tolerance, while CSO-community partnerships improve livelihoods (Mazorodze, 2024).

Despite these promising aspects, the literature reveals significant challenges to effective grassroots engagement. Ndakaripa (2023) points to limited grassroots visibility, particularly concerning state-led initiatives, while Yingi (2023) notes limited CSO autonomy and youth marginalisation. Iosr *et al.* (2015) observe that NGO partnerships often remain limited to funding and implementation, potentially hindering deeper local ownership. These findings suggest that systemic issues and power imbalances can impede the full effectiveness of CSOs. Ultimately, this review affirms that effective grassroots engagement is multi-faceted, demanding deep local ownership, inclusive participation, and the strategic integration of both informal mechanisms and traditional methods, underscoring the imperative for a nuanced understanding of grassroots dynamics, as sustainable peacebuilding is most impactful when genuinely implemented by and for the communities it serves, adapting to specific local contexts and empowering those directly affected by conflict.

The analysis of institutional collaboration within peacebuilding efforts reveals a complex and largely challenging landscape, characterised by a significant disconnect between state structures and grassroots initiatives. A dominant theme across numerous studies is the limited formal collaboration between governmental bodies and local peacebuilding actors, often forcing grassroots movements to operate with considerable autonomy but also within a limited scale. Rumutsa (2025) observes that many of such initiatives have minimal or no formal state engagement, a sentiment echoed by Chivasa (2022), who notes minimal formal collaboration and an emphasis on grassroots autonomy in community-initiated peace committees. This lack of formal recognition and support, as highlighted by Chivasa (2017) and Chivasa (2023), significantly hinders the scaling of successful local models and limits access to vital resources, as seen in the constrained local government

buy-in and resource access for community-based projects (Musarurwa, 2021). Consequently, self-help groups often receive limited formal support, struggling to integrate with the peace architectures at a macro level (Nyathi, 2019).

The primary impediments to effective institutional collaboration stem from deep-seated mutual distrust, societal polarisation, political interference, and inherent capacity gaps within state institutions. Makwerere (2024) explicitly identifies "constrained cooperation" and "mutual distrust" as defining features of state-CSO relations. This is also supported by Murwira (2022), who points to weak state-CSO collaboration. This environment is further exacerbated by political interference, which actively limits collaborative potential (Yingi, 2023), and governmental securitisation that can transform potential partners into subjects of control rather than allies (Ndawana, 2023). Jeffrey (2023) critically observes "weak state institutional capacity and lack of political will", suggesting not only an inability, but also a reluctance to engage meaningfully. This leads to "polarised CSO-state relations" (Ndakaripa, 2023) and a scenario where even existing partnerships face "regime suspicion and political challenges", effectively limiting their impact (Mazorodze, 2024). The state's limited support in a polarised environment further isolates grassroots efforts, leaving them to navigate complex peacebuilding challenges with insufficient systemic backing.

In the face of this institutional vacuum, informal structures and traditional mechanisms frequently step in to fill critical gaps, demonstrating community resilience and also highlighting systemic fragmentation. Tshuma (2022) notes that where the state is incapacitated, informal structures emerge to provide essential peacebuilding functions. Chivasa (2022) describes the formation of hybrid mechanisms involving both the elite and informal actors, indicative of adaptive strategies. However, the integration of these traditional mechanisms with state

structures remains complex and often inconsistent. Mutanda (2022) illustrates that traditional-state collaboration varies by context and is often influential yet fraught with complexities. Nyamanhindi (2020) points to limited state involvement in traditional mechanisms. Makore (2022) highlights another critical issue of limited gender sensitivity within traditional leadership despite nationwide efforts for gender parity, underscoring the need for careful consideration when integrating these diverse approaches.

Despite these significant hurdles, the study also articulates a clear imperative for improved synergy and identifies areas of potential collaboration. There are explicit calls for political reforms needed for effective collaboration (Nyamanhindi, 2020) and a recognised need for micro-macro synergy with state institutions (Chivasa, 2022), to ensure that local successes can inform and be supported by national frameworks. Recommendations for fostering better collaboration include mentorship and regional training hubs for NGOs (Dzinamarira *et al.*, 2024), advocating for professional social work involvement (Chivasa and Harris, 2019), and promoting media collaboration across sectors to counteract political bias (Chirunga and Mbwirire, 2020). The acknowledgement that spirituality can complement formal peacebuilding efforts (Moyo, 2021) also suggests avenues for more holistic and culturally resonant partnerships. Ultimately, the collective findings underscore that for peacebuilding to be truly sustainable and impactful, a fundamental shift towards genuine, inclusive, and trusting institutional partnership is not merely desirable, but essential.

CSOs engaged in peacebuilding in Zimbabwe face formidable political and resource challenges. The political environment is characterised by deep tensions, polarisation, and a constrained civic space, alongside a lack of political will (Rumutsa, 2025).

Political partisanship, absence of government recognition, and outright interference marginalise grassroots efforts, fostering mistrust and potentially driving youth violence (Mazorodze, 2024). Political dominance and repression further undermine positive peace campaigns (Ndawana, 2023). These political obstacles are compounded by severe resource limitations, including scarcity, budget, and financial constraints, as noted by Murwira (2022).

Beyond political and financial hurdles, CSOs also contend with significant structural, systemic, and socio-cultural challenges. Murwira (*ibid.*) argue that elitist peacebuilding models often exclude genuine grassroots inclusion, exacerbated by persistent ethnic and class divisions. Structural violence limits local mediation while the informality of grassroots initiatives restricts their policy influence (Chivasa, 2022). Gender insensitivity and patriarchal norms (Makore, 2022) hinder inclusive peacebuilding amidst widespread poverty, inequality, and violence, necessitating prolonged interventions (Rukuni, 2018). Other operational challenges include replicating context-specific successes, documentation gaps, and unlearning violence with traditional approaches often overwhelmed by large-scale violence (Kiyala, 2024). Complex social dynamics like loan repayment and community organisation, coupled with the digital divide limiting outreach and issues of amnesia and lack of repentance, collectively impede sustainable and transformative peace (Gusha, 2022).

It is noteworthy to indicate the need for appropriate evaluation of the peacebuilding initiatives to adequately measure the impact of these initiatives on conflict transformation. However, despite numerous challenges, this systematic review finds that various initiatives contribute significantly to peacebuilding, reconciliation, and social cohesion at different levels. A central theme is the strengthening of peace at the micro-level and

within community relations. Findings show that the initiatives lead to rebuilt relationships and foundations for social cohesion (Ncube, 2014), fostering community unity and a positive peace culture (Murwira, 2022). Masunda and Hlatshwayo (2024) specifically note strengthened peace at the micro-level, emphasising the importance of local interactions. This is often achieved through community empowerment, which builds resilience and local agency in peacebuilding processes (Chivasa, 2022), leading to sustainable local peacebuilding with community legitimacy (Chivasa, 2017). Furthermore, spiritual approaches are found to strengthen community cohesion while improved livelihoods contribute directly to peace and development (Mazorodze, 2024).

Many peacebuilding initiatives facilitate dialogue, healing, and reconciliation. Mandikwaza (2022) emphasises the facilitation of truth-telling, healing, and reconciliation at the local level. Safe spaces foster healing and change conflict perspectives, and restore relationships achieved through alternative reconciliation pathways (Mhandara, 2022). Dialogue is consistently identified as a powerful tool, creating transformative synergies for ethnic peace, reducing division, and creating platforms for discussion (Rukuni, 2018). Ethical dialogue offers new pathways for ethnic peace (Gusha, 2022), though it requires to be continually sustained (Phillimon, n.d.).

The research also underscores the enhancement of peacebuilding skills and capacities. Youth empowerment is directly linked to violence mitigation potential (Yingi, 2023), and youth programmes are shown to reduce risky behaviours and promote peace (Rukuni *et al.*, 2017). Capacity building is deemed critical for NGO effectiveness and growth (Dzinamarira *et al.*, 2024), while participatory monitoring and evaluation (M&E) enhances peacebuilding effectiveness (Chivasa, 2019). Peace education is effective in promoting non-violence skills

(Iosr *et al.*, 2015), and it can be feasible with adaptive strategies (Akande *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, the studies reveal the positive impact of inclusive and diverse approaches to peacebuilding. Community-led peacebuilding is effective in conflict-torn areas (Nyamanhindi, 2020).

Traditional justice systems support community-led peacebuilding (Mutanda, 2022), and traditional leaders are crucial in consolidating peace locally. Gender-sensitive leadership enhances peace and justice roles (Makore, 2022). Arts-based initiatives foster dialogue and psychological healing, while social entrepreneurship offers innovative conflict transformation (Musarurwa, 2021). Social work can strengthen community peace initiatives (Chivasa and Harris, 2019), and media can promote co-existence and reconciliation (Chirunga and Mbwirire, 2020). Even social media offers new avenues for peace engagement (Ndawana, 2023). The potential for sustainable reconciliation through hybrid models is also noted (Jeffrey, 2023), and African peace models are considered viable with adaptation and support (Morreira, 2022).

Despite some underperforming transitional justice processes and mixed impacts on election-related violence, political instability (Ndakaripa, 2023), the bulk of the research demonstrates significant positive impacts on conflict transformation. These range from improved political tolerance and enhanced violence mitigation to the rebuilding of relationships, fostering of healing, and the development of crucial peacebuilding skills. The effectiveness is often rooted in community-responsiveness, inclusive approaches that leverage local agency, traditional mechanisms, and diverse modalities to build sustainable peace from the grassroots, emphasising that strengthening partnerships is critical for sustainable programming (Gusha, 2022).

CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The critical analysis of peacebuilding in Zimbabwe reveals significant methodological and operational challenges. While qualitative and participatory action research offer deep contextual insights, their inherent context-bound nature often limits generalisability and broad replicability, with potential biases arising from reliance on primary data and self-reporting (Murwira, 2022). A notable gap exists in longitudinal studies needed to assess long-term impact. Furthermore, while IKS bolster legitimacy, they struggle to address entrenched structural issues like unemployment and political interference (*ibid.*), and some traditional practices may inadvertently perpetuate patriarchal norms or exclude marginalised groups (Makore, 2022), with integration into formal state mechanisms remaining difficult (Mutanda, 2022). IPCs, despite their flexibility and inclusivity, face severe constraints due to a pervasive lack of official recognition, inadequate resources (Chivasa and Harris, 2019), strained relationships with state structures, and limited access to policy influence (Tshuma, 2022), thereby restricting their capacity to address systemic conflicts on a larger scale.

Broader challenges significantly impede the operational effectiveness of CSOs and collaborative efforts. CSOs consistently grapple with political interference, chronic funding shortages, curtailed autonomy, and capacity deficits (Dzinamarira *et al.*, 2024), with political polarisation undermining their credibility, especially during electoral periods (Ndakaripa, 2023). This often leads to fragmented efforts and a lack of government support, fostering an environment of suspicion (Makwerere, 2024). Collaboration between state and civil society actors remains limited and fraught with mistrust, with state-led committees often suffering from partisan dominance (Makwerere, 2024) and the NPRC struggling with political will, insufficient funding, and limited grassroots

visibility (Nyamanhindi, 2020; Jeffrey, 2023). Even promising innovations in peacebuilding models often remain pilot projects with limited scale and sustainability due to resource constraints and political interference (Rukuni, 2018), lacking systematic evaluation. Finally, formal transitional justice mechanisms are plagued by political interference, insufficient funding, and a failure to address root causes or deliver substantive justice (Jeffrey, 2023), often lacking broad ownership and inclusive participation, demonstrating that mediation alone cannot substitute for fundamental institutional reforms.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The literature consistently highlights the pivotal role of CSOs in fostering sustainable peace in Zimbabwe through locally grounded, participatory, and culturally resonant initiatives, such as social entrepreneurship, grassroots mediation, and arts-based conflict transformation. These interventions draw heavily on IKS to enhance local ownership and legitimacy. While grassroots engagement, particularly involving women, youth, and minority groups, strengthens social cohesion to address historical grievances, it faces significant barriers, including patriarchal norms, political interference, and resource constraints, leading to uncertainty and a lack of sustainability. Furthermore, institutional collaboration between state and civil society remains limited and often mistrustful, impeding larger-scale conflict transformation and the effectiveness of formal transitional justice mechanisms, despite emerging frameworks like the NPRC. Despite these challenges, promising innovations in restorative justice and gender-sensitive approaches exist, but their scalability is often limited. Therefore, there is need for robust, integrative frameworks that link grassroots innovation with institutional support to foster enhanced collaboration between the government, CSOs and local players.

Building upon a critical analysis of the existing literature, which reveal areas of consensus and divergence, limitations, and crucial gaps for future inquiry, the following four strategic recommendations are put forth. These recommendations are designed to guide subsequent research and practice, aiming to enhance the robustness, relevance, and impact of peacebuilding efforts, particularly within the Zimbabwean context, by providing more specific guidance and addressing the prevailing socio-political environment.

Future research should prioritise quantitative analysis and generalisability, ensuring that findings are robust and widely applicable, while also integrating longitudinal studies to comprehensively assess the long-term impact and sustainability of peacebuilding interventions. Furthermore, it is crucial to actively mitigate bias and deepen local ownership through the rigorous establishment of participatory frameworks such as Participatory Grassroots Communities Appraisal (PRA) or Participatory Action Research (PAR), thereby empowering communities to lead their own peace processes. There is also clear need to investigate and promote models for enhanced multi-stakeholder collaboration and capacity building, fostering more effective partnerships between various stakeholders to strengthen collective peacebuilding efforts. Also, there is clear need to investigate and promote concrete models for enhanced multi-stakeholder collaboration, suggesting formal inter-agency collaboration, co-creation platforms, and capacity-building initiatives focused on joint planning and shared monitoring. If properly implemented, these recommendations address the challenging socio-political environment, emphasising multi-stakeholder engagement and collaboration to transform socio-cultural and political norms of violence and conflict to expand civic space, promote dialogue, integrate indigenous practices of conflict resolution, and implement a civic education programme to promote peacebuilding from the grassroots.

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