
Conclusion

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This monograph is part of a series at ACCORD which discusses the various institutionalised structures that have been developed to prevent and manage conflict in Africa. On the spectrum of conflict management, these panels or councils are among other instruments presented as tools for early and preventative action. The first monograph focused on the role, progress and challenges of Mediation Support Units (MSUs) within the regional economic communities (RECs). As a continuation of this discussion, this publication sought to evaluate another tool in the conflict management strategies of the RECs and African Union (AU) that looks to complement technical approaches with advocacy for political solutions. It brings together a collection of chapters written by practitioner-academics who offer a diverse range of perspectives based on their respective experiences of working alongside or within the abovementioned institutions. It does so within a fragile conflict landscape on the continent defined by geopolitical contestations, protracted conflict and an increasingly fragmented international system. Moreover, at a time when international multilateral institutions are struggling to effectively respond to escalating conflicts (not only in Africa), 'taking stock' of our own institutional instruments becomes ever more relevant and especially based on the logic that the proximity to a conflict offers a comparative advantage in terms of response and management. It is also a timely reflection on a part of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) which, as part of the Protocol Establishing the Peace and Security Council of the AU, turns 20 this year.

While the symbolic and practical value of the panels and councils has been well established, this monograph aimed to fill the gaps in the existing body of knowledge about the recent effectiveness of their roles, the consistency of their impact and their future sustainability as part of the conflict prevention tools in Africa. In some chapters, the difficulties surrounding the processes of gathering data and accessing information from those within the structures under study has reiterated the continued challenges around

knowledge production in the field of peace and security as a sub-discipline of international relations. These challenges, partly defined by the sensitivities related to the subject matter, contributed to some of the limitations of this research. Nevertheless, this collection of papers adds to the valuable existing work on the panels and councils of the wise by engaging in an important conceptual debate on diplomatic practice, conflict prevention and conflict management.

As part of its descriptive analysis, it has described the panels and councils as being broadly tasked with roles related to confidence-building among different protagonists, mediation, prevention, monitoring, and advising. Specific areas of intervention may include an observation role during elections, reporting on human rights abuses, monitoring various stages of a peace process or representing institutions on missions of 'quiet diplomacy.'

While the model of panels and elders promotes a collaborative approach which harnesses collective experiences and competencies, the selection of the members has largely been based on the profile and status of the selected 'elder' in the African political and diplomatic community. Indeed, very few elders have been selected from outside their respective political establishments and appointments made to the panel have come from a pool of former presidents, ministers or established politicians. A possible explanation for this could be that along with knowledge sharing and advice, the elder is expected to be influential in a process that is largely deemed as political. This, in addition to the fact that, as mentioned in the introduction, governments may be one of the stakeholders/protagonists in a conflict. These panels or councils can therefore at times be seen as manifestations of the 'politics of personality' on the continent and possibly present an interesting point of discussion around the politics of mediation.

During a reflection on the various panels and councils of the wise at the 2023 14th High-Level Retreat on the Promotion of Peace, Security, and Stability in Africa with the theme, "Resetting Preventive Diplomacy and Mediation for the 21st Century in Africa," a prominent elder and member of one of the councils explained that eminent personalities should not merely be seen as 'firefighters.' This metaphor was taken to mean that the role, value and

therefore the meaningful and potential contribution of the panels and councils is sometimes lost in how or whether they are deployed in reality. More specifically, this remark was likely intended as a reminder of the importance of the panels and councils as an early warning instrument. Like many of the potentially valuable tools within the RECS and the AU, the panels and councils are vulnerable to the politics and national interests of member states – a challenge endemic to any multilateral institution. This reality is reflected in how effective the panels and councils have been in their various deployments. Across the various chapters in this monograph, the authors have demonstrated how this has played out. For example, in some cases, the AU Panel of the Wise (PoW) has had to balance its intentions to engage proactively with the positions of member states that a conflict had not escalated to a stage that required intervention or that it was able to resolve the conflict without external intervention. In the case of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Panel of the Elders (PoE), its deployment challenges were directly related to the non-compliance of the intended recipient state. Similarly, in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), political developments surrounding the suspended/sanctioned countries, have negatively affected the overall financial and political support to the ECOWAS Council of the Wise (CoW).

Relatedly, the issue of underfunding was presented as a common challenge across the various RECs and the AU and is also partly related to uneven political will from the respective member states. Aptly put in the preceding monograph on the MSUs, there is still a lack of commitment to “African solutions to African problems with African money” (Apuuli, 2023:38). While these common issues present a grim analysis of the current state of the panels and councils, the potential of its initial rationale remains intact as a source of inspiration to do better.

The underlying assumptions of the councils and panels remain that elders and eminent personalities have an important place in dispute resolution in African societies - and is likely a familiar practice in other parts of the world. It is an approach which offers an interesting example of how context-specific ways of responding to societal challenges could inform institutional practice.

Borrowing from an anthropological approach, it emphasises specific practices, histories and societal organisation as points of reference to inform the structure at the multilateral level. In theory, not only does this guard against the imposition of models of dispute resolution which reflect the histories and experiences of those located outside of Africa but echoes a *sankofa-esque* call to rely on the wisdom, knowledge and heritage of the affected societies in order to design solutions. This is not to romanticise context-specific practices but to draw attention to the value of relational and practical approaches to conflict resolution from various African communities.

The development of the panels/councils has taken place alongside existing mechanisms like the MSUs. While this shows the normative shift towards institutionalised approaches to conflict prevention, it also presents an opportunity for collaborative approaches of the various structures within organisations. As discussed in this monograph, linking and synergising the panels/councils with other organs might help to bolster the financial and political support which these panels/councils lack. Other findings from the authors of this research on how to strengthen the role of the panels/councils include incorporating periodic assessments and possibly in-person evaluations into previous sites of engagement. This is to monitor the implementation of their recommendations and ensure that their intervention is not a once-off project that becomes disconnected from a sustainable peace project. In order to help boost the capacity to take on engagements, the panels/councils must benefit from a dedicated technical/support staff and more predictable funding arrangements. Such changes might also help to mitigate the challenges related to the ad-hoc appointment of eminent personalities such as those experiences with the East African Community (EAC). These are just snapshots into the possible avenues of improvement with more detail contained within each chapter. It is hoped that scholars and practitioners (both at the community, state and institutional levels) will find the discussions within this monograph useful, and that it will inspire future work on preventive diplomacy, conflict prevention and mediation. 🌸