
Institutionalising Wisdom: The Role of the Panels/Councils in Peacemaking in Africa

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Introduction

In cultures across the African continent, elders are well respected members of society who are valued for a number of reasons, including the fact that they are considered repositories of wisdom due to the experiences that they have gained during the course of their lifetime. Elders have the responsibility of helping to preserve culture and heritage, and by sharing their knowledge with those younger than them, elders are able to help foster a sense of belonging. The sharing of knowledge from one generation to the next re-enforces the importance that normative practices play in society and gives insights into where people come from.

Elders in society also play the role of guiding the younger generations through various challenges that they may face. For many communities, the past can help the present to build a better future. In addition, community elders are often called upon to mediate disputes that may arise at various levels of society. Communities turn to elders in cases of dispute, due to their wisdom and experience, as well as the fact that their authority and standing in society is often respected by most people. As a result, elders have a role to play in conflict resolution and social cohesion that has both cultural and historical precedence. It is this logic that underpins the formation of the panels of the wise/elders created by the African Union (AU) and various Regional Economic Communities/Regional Mechanisms (RECs/RMs). These institutions have attempted to formalise this ubiquitous cultural practice around the roles that elders play in society into a tool that can be used for peacemaking and preventative diplomacy.

The panels of the wise/elders are constituted by individuals who have a high profile and who are respected on the continent, or in their region, and who

would have made contributions in matters of governance, peace and security. In many cases, the panels are made up of former heads of state and government, or former members of cabinet, although this is not strictly the case. The rationale is that for the panels to be effective, they need to comprise of individuals who are respected by a large section of society, as well as those in government, as the work of the panels will most certainly include interactions with the governments of the day. As the panels are generally made up of individuals that were once in government, they are familiar with the protocols and procedures that accompany interactions with the state.

However, in societies where elders are called on to intervene in a conflict, they are often known to the citizens within the community. These elders also share the same culture and heritage of those who have turned to them for intervention. For the panels of the wise/elders, this is not always the case. Elders on these panels may come from different countries and regions than the countries and communities where they intervene. This may undermine the effectiveness of the panels as the authority of the elders is not as legitimate in the eyes of the people. A question must then be asked, whose elders should make up the panels of the wise/elders. While elder statesmen and women may be respected by those in government and regional and continental bodies, this may not be translated into the same level of respect amongst people at the community level or those outside of government. In many respects the AU and the RECs have struggled to filter their work down to the community level of member states and a panel of elders/wise that is constituted exclusively by individuals from the political elite may not be as effective as envisioned. Despite these factors, the panels are still important structures in the continent's conflict prevention mechanisms.

This monograph will look at five different panels in Africa, namely the continental Panel of the Wise (PoW), established by the AU, and the recently formed, Network of African Youth on Conflict Prevention and Mediation (WiseYouth). At the regional level, there are chapters on the Southern African Development Community's (SADC's) Panel of Elders (PoE), the East African Community's (EAC's) Panel of Eminent Persons (PEP) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Council of the Wise (CoW).

The AU's PoW was introduced by the AU's Protocol Establishing the Peace and Security Council that was adopted in 2002 and its modalities were adopted by the 100th sitting of the Peace and Security Council (PSC) in 2007. The PoW has the mandate of assisting the AU Chairperson, the Commission and the PSC in their conflict prevention efforts. The PoW, which is constituted by five elder statesmen and women does not have a conflict resolution function, but it does have the right to pronounce itself on issues that may relate to the promotion and maintenance of peace and security. While the PoW does have a limited mandate, it is envisioned that it plays an important role in conflict prevention on the continent. As conflict prevention is the focus of the PoW, it is thus hoped by the AU that the PoW is able to intervene timeously in disputes before they escalate.

However, the PoW has struggled to assert its independence within the AU, and has found its functioning to some degree constrained by the Commission. It was outlined in the establishment of the PoW that it would act in a proactive manner when it comes to intervening in conflicts. This limitation comes due to member states often being reluctant to acknowledge a conflict or issue in their state, especially at an early stage. This, however, is a challenge that the AU and its structures grapple with on all levels. The sovereignty of member states limits the ability of the AU, and, in this case, the PoW to intervene in instances of conflict or crisis. These aspects and many more are explored in the chapter on the AU PoW written by Tim Murithi.

A new addition to the AU's Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) is WiseYouth, which was launched in 2022. The PSC introduced WiseYouth as a mechanism to entrench the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda on the continent and provide a platform for youth inclusion. YPS itself is a relatively new concept in peace and security studies, but it is an important area of study, given Africa's large and growing youth population as well as the role that youth play in conflicts in Africa. It is hoped that initiatives like WiseYouth are able to mainstream the youth agenda on the continent while investing in the education, skills and leadership abilities of the continent's youth.

In many countries across the continent, youth are often excluded from political processes and participation, while having little room to influence decision-making. In states experiencing conflict, this lack of participation is exacerbated by the risk of young people being recruited to join armed groups and participate in conflicts. The YPS agenda and WiseYouth hope to produce solutions to the challenges faced by young people, while also providing youth at various levels of society with a platform to voice their grievances, opinions and solutions. Muneinazvo Kujeke explores WiseYouth and its role in existing continental frameworks, the mainstreaming of the youth agenda and the ways in which the PSC can make use of WiseYouth going forward.

At the regional level, SADC established its PoE in 2010, as an instrument for conflict prevention and management in the region. More specifically, the PoE was established to promote peace, security and stability, and sits within the bloc's Mediation, Conflict Prevention and Preventive Diplomacy mechanism. Unlike one of the challenges that the AU PoW faces, which is a lack of institutional support, the SADC PoE receives support from the Mediation Reference Group (MRG). Like the AU PoW, the SADC PoE has conflict prevention functions, with one of its roles being the assistance of preventative and mediation initiatives. In addition, the PoE also has the ability to facilitate dialogue, negotiate and mediate in conflicts and it is seen as one of the key structures in SADC's peace and security efforts.

However, the PoE has also struggled to assert its effectiveness, as, despite becoming operational in 2014, it was not until 2020 that there is a record of PoE involvement in any mediation efforts. In recent years, this has changed, with the PoE becoming more active in preventative diplomacy, particularly during election periods in the region. The PoE has a clear role to play during election periods in SADC member states, and since 2022 has been involved in preventing and mediating conflicts that have arisen due to electoral challenges. However, as with the AU PoW, the PoE must work within the framework of the institution and requires the consent of member states prior to involvement in any crises. In their chapter, Tunji Namaiko and Oita Etyang discuss the formation of the SADC PoE, its effectiveness and the challenges that the Panel has faced. There is also a discussion on

the cases where the PoE has been involved in mediation efforts in various member states.

At a similar time to the formation of the SADC PoE, the EAC was also undertaking efforts to create its own panel. The founding treaty of the EAC recognised the importance of peace and security in achieving their goals and objectives, thus requiring the formation of a Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution mechanism. Within this mechanism sits the PEP that was established in 2012 and became operational in 2014. The PEP was established to advise the Summit on issues that relate to the promotion of peace and security, the protection and promotion of human rights and the rule of law in East Africa. Unlike other panels, the PEP is not a standing structure where members of the panel serve for a specific term. Instead, the EAC PEP members are appointed on a case-by-case basis, with the EAC member states determining the situations where the PEP can intervene. This limits the PEP's effectiveness, as it does not have a standing budget, unlike the SADC PoE and the AU's PoW and WiseYouth.

Kasaija Phillip Apuuli discusses the formation of the PEP, where it sits within the EAC's structures and various instances of PEP involvement in crises in the region. The East Africa region has experienced a number of conflicts since the formation of the EAC and the PEP. The PEP was involved in the EAC's intervention in Burundi, where the eminent persons were tasked with organising dialogues with the various conflict actors. However, the PEP has not been called on to assist in the current crisis in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), despite struggles from various organisations to solve the crisis. The EAC also has to deal with strained bilateral relations between member states, which opens up a space for possible PEP involvement in mediating these strained relations, but also limits the space available for the deployment of the PEP, as it requires the very same member states to call on it before it can get involved.

The final chapter is written by Festus Kofi Aubyn and Chukwuemeka B. Eze on the ECOWAS CoW. The CoW, like other panels, is a key pillar in ECOWAS' preventative diplomacy mechanisms, supporting the Mediation and Security Council. The CoW has faced similar changes as other councils on the continent, such as underutilisation and a lack of funding. The CoW was

one of the first panels of the elder/wise to be formed, in 2004, but it was non-functional for most of its early existence. It was not until 2016, as the West Africa region faced growing security challenges that the CoW became more active. In 2021, the CoW was reconstituted in order to address some of the challenges that the mechanism faced.

Since its reconstitution, the CoW has been involved in a number of crisis situations, such as in Mali, where former president of Nigeria, Goodluck Johnathan was deployed as a special envoy to head mediation efforts. In addition, like the SADC PoE, the CoW has also been used in election observation missions. It is important for the elections that take place to be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the citizens. The role of election observation, which the CoW plays a part in, is thus an important one in the broader security context of the region.

This monograph explores in greater detail each of these panels of the wise/elders. The panels are important structures in the AU and RECs various early warning and conflict prevention mechanisms. It is important for Africa to draw on all the resources available to it in order to deal with the peace and security challenges that the continent faces. This monograph thus aims to contribute to the knowledge on the formations, structures and operations of the panels, as well as discuss their effectiveness in the on-going pursuit of Africa's peace and stability. 🌍