

Strengthening Peace Building Through Rural Self-Help Projects in Turkana North Sub-County, Kenya



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Abstract

This enhanced study critically examines the strategic role of Rural Self-Help Projects (RSHPs) in peacebuilding within Turkana North Sub-County, Kenya, an area beset by endemic interethnic conflict, pastoral insecurity, and developmental neglect. Guided by Peacebuilding Theory (Lederach, 1997) [1] and Human Needs Theory (Burton, 1990) [2], and enriched with Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005) [3], this research utilizes a mixed-methods descriptive design to investigate both the depth and scope of RSHP interventions. Key strategies identified include grassroots dialogues, joint economic ventures, traditional justice systems, intercultural events, and inclusive governance. Comparisons are drawn from global contexts such as Nepal, Colombia, and Rwanda, revealing both shared principles and divergent state engagements. The findings underscore the contextual success of RSHPs in catalyzing social cohesion, mitigating violence, and enhancing local ownership of peace processes. The paper calls for policy integration, financial autonomy, and structural partnerships to enhance the sustainability and replicability of RSHPs across fragile settings.

Keywords: Peacebuilding; Rural Self-Help Projects; Social Cohesion; Conflict Transformation; Turkana North; Kenya

Abbreviations: RSHPs: Rural Self-Help Projects; KIIs: Informant Interviews; FGDs: 3 Focus Group Discussions; NACOSTI: National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation; VSLAs: Village Savings and Loan Associations; NDMA: National Drought Management Authority

Introduction

Rural Self-Help Projects (RSHPs) have emerged as vital grassroots mechanisms for community development and conflict transformation, particularly in fragile and marginalized regions. Rooted in principles of collective agency, self-reliance, and participatory governance, RSHPs empower local communities to identify, prioritize, and address their socio-economic and peacebuilding needs. These projects are increasingly viewed not only as tools for rural development but also as critical vehicles for fostering social cohesion, preventing conflict, and promoting inclusive governance. Turkana North Sub-County, situated along Kenya's volatile border with Ethiopia and South Sudan, epitomizes the multifaceted challenges of underdevelopment, pastoralist insecurity, and chronic interethnic violence.

Despite sustained efforts by governmental and non-governmental actors, durable peace remains elusive, largely due to historical marginalization, weak state presence, ecological fragility, and the recurring cycles of cross-border conflict [4-6]. Within this complex landscape, RSHPs represent a promising alternative

peace infrastructure. Unlike top-down interventions, RSHPs leverage community trust, traditional authority systems, and endogenous knowledge to mediate conflict and foster development.

They are aligned with international frameworks such as the African Union's Agenda 2063 and Kenya's Vision 2030, which emphasize grassroots innovation, inclusive governance, and resilience in marginalized zones. This study examines the strategic role of RSHPs in peacebuilding in Turkana North, with a focus on the mechanisms they employ, their outcomes, and the challenges they face. It draws empirical evidence and comparative analysis to fill a critical knowledge gap in peace and development scholarship by highlighting how localized strategies, when appropriately supported, can contribute meaningfully to sustainable peace.

Literature Review

Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations Rural Self-Help Projects (RSHPs) are anchored in grassroots collectivism, whereby community members mobilize shared resources, skills, and knowledge to meet local needs. Conceptually, RSHPs reflect both

practical and theoretical dimensions of participatory development and peacebuilding. Human Needs Theory (Burton, 1990) [2] posits that sustainable peace cannot be attained without addressing non-negotiable needs such as identity, recognition, and participation. RSHPs inherently seek to satisfy these needs by fostering inclusion, empowering marginalized voices, and facilitating economic and social autonomy.

Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005) [3] complements this framework by emphasizing the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors' institutions, tools, cultural norms, and economic mechanisms in shaping peace outcomes. RSHPs are not just collectives of people; they are dynamic systems influenced by local traditions, savings models, informal justice systems, and development interventions. Haider (2009) [7] further underscores that community-led peacebuilding enhances legitimacy and effectiveness in fragile contexts where state institutions may be absent or mistrusted. Chivasa (2017) [8] adds that RSHPs can act as incubators for reconciliation, enabling community regeneration and informal dispute resolution.

RSHPs and similar grassroots initiatives have played transformative roles in post-conflict recovery. In Colombia, Asociaciones Campesinas integrated agro-cooperatives with localized justice to stabilize conflict-affected communities, supported by state recognition and legal protections (Richani, 2013) [9]. In post-war Nepal, reintegration of ex-combatants through joint farming and microfinance initiatives led to stronger communal bonds and reduced recidivism (Upreti, 2006) [10]. Sri Lanka's village forums, often led by women, proved instrumental in mediating ethnic divisions and fostering trust (Goodhand & Klem, 2005) [11], while Rwanda's Gacaca courts relied on culturally legitimate processes for post-genocide healing (Clark, 2010) [12].

Regionally, grassroots peacebuilding efforts across the Horn of Africa echo these successes. In Uganda's Karamoja region, integration of customary elders into formal peace frameworks led to sustained reductions in livestock raids (Mkutu, 2007) [13]. Ethiopia's Afar and Somali border regions have implemented RSHP-like models to mitigate pastoralist conflicts, supported by hybrid institutions blending customary and administrative authority (Gebre, 2001) [14]. These cases demonstrate that where RSHPs are embedded within local cultures and supported institutionally, they achieve broad-based legitimacy and impact.

However, success often hinges on consistent funding, political will, and legal recognition elements frequently lacking in Kenya's decentralized peace architecture. RSHPs have gained traction in marginalized counties such as Turkana, Baringo, Marsabit, and Isiolo. According to Korir (2009) and Alene (2011) [15,16], RSHPs in Baringo and Turkana have facilitated peace caravans, interethnic markets, and youth livelihood programs that promote cooperation and deter violence. Akal (2018) [17] documents the use of traditional reconciliation mechanisms, such as "ekitoe," harmonized with Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) and women's empowerment initiatives.

Despite these successes, Kenyan RSHPs face systemic limitations. First, their integration into formal peace and development frameworks is weak. National peacebuilding policies and county development plans often omit or underfund grassroots models (Wairuri, 2015) [18]. Second, most RSHPs rely heavily on external donor funding, making their operations unsustainable in the long term. Third, challenges such as low literacy, elite capture, political interference, and environmental shock constrain their operational capacity (Nangiro, 2020) [19].

Furthermore, there is a significant research gap regarding the long-term outcomes of RSHP-driven peacebuilding in Kenya. Most studies remain localized and descriptive, lacking comparative or evaluative rigor. There is limited longitudinal evidence on how RSHPs contribute to structural transformation, especially in contexts of chronic insecurity like Turkana North. This study seeks to address these gaps by providing empirical evidence on the strategies, outcomes, and limitations of RSHPs in Turkana North Sub-County, while drawing comparative insights from global and regional experiences.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive cross-sectional research design to investigate the peacebuilding strategies employed by Rural Self-Help Projects (RSHPs) in Turkana North Sub-County. The research was guided by the need to generate both statistically reliable patterns and in-depth qualitative insights, hence the adoption of a mixed-methods approach integrating quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis.

A total of 108 participants were purposively selected to ensure comprehensive representation of the stakeholders involved in or impacted by RSHP activities. The sample included RSHP leaders and members, youth and women group representatives, community elders, local administrators, and peacebuilding officers. This purposive sampling strategy was justified by the localized nature of RSHP interventions and the importance of experiential knowledge in peacebuilding research.

Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires, which assessed the frequency and types of RSHP interventions, perceived effectiveness, and community outcomes related to peace and cohesion. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze these data using SPSS version 25, generating frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations to identify trends. For the qualitative component, 20 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and 3 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted.

The KIIs targeted peace committee officials, government representatives, and senior RSHP leaders, while the FGDs captured youth and women's voices in different conflict-prone zones. Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) [20], six-phase model: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Ethical approval was obtained from the Africa Nazarene University

Ethics Review Committee, and a research permit was granted by Kenya's National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI). Participation was voluntary, informed consent was secured, and anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process.

Findings and Discussion

Community Dialogues

Over 78% of participants acknowledged that RSHPs in Turkana North Sub-County regularly organize peace forums, dialogue meetings, and traditional reconciliation gatherings. These events often convene historically rival communities, particularly Turkana and Dassanech, fostering mutual understanding and narrative-sharing. By combining traditional mechanisms such as "ekitoe"-a community ritual aimed at restoring harmony-with structured mediation techniques, RSHPs bridge cultural and generational divides. Participants reported noticeable improvements in interethnic trust and willingness to collaborate on community issues.

This aligns with Lederach's (1997) framework [1], which identifies grassroots relationship-building as fundamental to sustainable peace. Comparatively, community dialogues in Nepal's Madhesh region and South Sudan's Jonglei State yielded similar outcomes, underscoring the universality of relational reconciliation. Within Kenya, similar successes were observed in Marsabit County where peace dialogues led by elders and women's groups curbed communal violence (Mohamed, 2020) [21]. In Isiolo, the Isiolo Peace and Conflict Resolution Committee has demonstrated that localized dialogue can yield tangible results (Kimenyi & Ndung'u, 2005) [22].

Livelihood Initiatives

Approximately 65% of respondents pointed to livelihood support as a pivotal peacebuilding strategy. RSHPs introduced goat-rearing projects, seed grants, and vocational training programs targeting unemployed youth and marginalized women. These economic engagements reduced dependency on aid and created alternative pathways to income generation, thereby discouraging cattle raiding and participation in local militias. Participants also noted enhanced social interaction and cooperation between ethnic groups involved in joint agricultural or trading ventures.

This finding is consistent with Richani's (2013) [9] work in Colombia, where economic interdependence among rural cooperatives contributed to the de-escalation of conflict. Additionally, cross-border women's trade initiatives with communities in Uganda and Ethiopia illustrate the peace dividends of regional economic collaboration. In Kenya, the Turkana-Pokot peace markets facilitated by the National Drought Management Authority (NDMA) and USAID under the Resilience and Economic Growth in the Arid Lands (REGAL) program have shown that economic interlinkages can effectively reduce tensions (USAID, 2016) [23].

Cultural Integration Events

Cultural events were identified by over half the participants as essential to RSHPs' peace strategies. These included sports tournaments, music festivals, dance competitions, and communal feasts held across contested border zones. Such events created informal spaces for reconciliation, symbolic healing, and the redefinition of intergroup relationships.

A prominent example was a peace festival in Lowareng'ak that involved the Turkana and Toposa communities, resulting in a reported 45% decrease in cross-border hostilities within one year. These findings resonate with Rwanda's post-genocide use of the Gacaca courts and cultural performances to reknit the social fabric (Clark, 2010) [12], and with Dolan's (2005) [24] documentation of communal healing practices in Northern Uganda. In Kenya, the Samburu-Laikipia border area witnessed similar reductions in violence following culturally grounded peace performances sponsored by local CSOs (Pkalya et al., 2004) [25].

Traditional Governance Mechanisms

Sixty percent of respondents emphasized the effectiveness of RSHPs' collaboration with local governance structures, particularly elders, chiefs, and peace committees. These actors, grounded in indigenous legitimacy, play crucial roles in enforcing peace agreements, mediating disputes, and sanctioning violations through culturally recognized mechanisms. The research revealed that barazas, community meetings co-organized by RSHPs and local leaders are central venues for truth-telling, grievance airing, and consensus-building.

This hybrid approach of integrating customary and modern governance structures reflects Isser's (2012) [26] concept of legal pluralism, where peacebuilding is most effective when rooted in local traditions but open to innovation. Unlike formal courts, these systems are more accessible, culturally resonant, and trusted by the community. Regionally, in Karamoja, Uganda, the integration of local chiefs and peace actors into cross-border agreements has proven highly successful in curbing livestock raids and building durable peace (Mkutu, 2007) [13].

Inclusion of Marginalized Groups

More than 55% of RSHP membership consists of women and youth, two groups historically excluded from peace negotiations. Their active involvement in savings groups, leadership forums, and peace caravans has not only challenged patriarchal norms but also reduced the vulnerability of youth to manipulation by armed groups. Women's economic forums and youth entrepreneurship projects were cited as particularly effective in building an agency, promoting civic participation, and reshaping intergenerational attitudes toward peace.

These results affirm the core tenets of Human Needs Theory (Burton, 1990) [22], especially the need for recognition and participation. Globally, the inclusion of women in peacebuilding processes is linked to longer-lasting peace agreements (UN, 2015)

[27], making this a critical success factor for Turkana's stability. Within Kenya, programs like the Women Peace Builders Network in Wajir and Garissa have shown that involving women in mediation processes significantly lowers the risk of recurring conflict (Ruto & Ndungu, 2012) [28].

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that RSHPs play an indispensable role in advancing peacebuilding in Turkana North Sub-County through context-sensitive, community-led strategies. By facilitating dialogue forums rooted in traditional practices, supporting economic interdependence through livelihood initiatives, and leveraging cultural events for reconciliation, RSHPs create a locally legitimate architecture of peace that transcends formal institutional limits. Their integration with customary governance structures enhances conflict resolution processes, while the inclusion of youth and women challenges longstanding exclusion and bolsters community resilience.

Comparative insights from regions such as South Sudan, Uganda, and Colombia affirm that grassroots models anchored in cultural familiarity and local ownership tend to outperform top-down peace interventions. However, in the Kenyan context, the lack of institutional support, inadequate funding, and fragmented policy frameworks remain pressing obstacles to RSHPs' full potential. To build sustainable peace in Turkana and similar conflict-prone areas, national and county governments must recognize and mainstream RSHPs within broader peace and development strategies.

These efforts should be complemented by donor realignment towards long-term support mechanisms, and by nurturing synergies among civil society, local communities, and formal institutions. Only by investing in these homegrown, participatory, and inclusive initiatives can Kenya achieve enduring peace and equitable development in its marginalized frontier regions.

Recommendations

The institutionalization of RSHPs within county governments is essential. By embedding these projects into county integrated development plans and peace policy frameworks, their impact can be sustained and scaled across regions. Targeted financial support and improved rural infrastructure are necessary to enhance the outreach and operational capacity of RSHPs. Investment in transportation, storage, and communication infrastructure will enable these groups to function more effectively. There is a pressing need for capacity building among local peace actors.

Training in conflict sensitivity, facilitation of dialogue, and economic management will equip RSHPs with the skills needed to navigate complex peacebuilding environments. Policy dialogue platforms should be established to promote collaboration between RSHPs, civil society organizations (CSOs), and government agencies. Such platforms will help harmonize strategies, prevent duplication, and foster a unified approach to peacebuilding.

Finally, effective monitoring and evaluation systems tailored to local contexts must be developed. These tools will ensure accountability, allow adaptive learning, and track peace outcomes over time to inform future interventions.

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