“Local Peace Committees build peace in their communities through dialogue spaces where people engage each other in search of solutions.”

Zimbabwe’s government and people face challenges today that range from development to economic sustainability and livelihoods. Combined with the aftermath of a violent past, these challenges impact on Zimbabweans’ sense of security in more than one way. As religious and traditional leaders, politicians and other community members reflect on sources of insecurity, national healing and reconciliation emerges as an important priority. Community-driven Local Peace Committees that combine traditional and contemporary governance structures have contributed to fostering a stable and inclusive political atmosphere.

Community-Based Healing and Reconciliation in Zimbabwe

Bishop Emeritus Dr Ambrose Moyo, Ecumenical Church Leaders Forum (ECLF)
Zimbabwe gained independence from Britain in 1980 after years of wars and struggles, the impact of which is still felt today. During the pre-independence war and episodes of violence in the post-independence era, the country experienced displacement of people, loss of life, and conflict among communities, leading to a traumatised society. The post-independence era, Zimbabwean citizens have been repeatedly divided by violent conflict and political polarisation. Though outright conflict officially ended with a unity agreement between the main political parties in 1987, lingering hostilities remain to this day.

After a decade of economic shocks and decline, marked by peak inflation at 231 million percent in July 2008, the introduction of a multi-currency regime in 2009 began to stabilise the economic environment. The GDP growth rate grew as high as 11.4 percent and 10.6 percent in 2010 and 2012 respectively, though it dropped to 3.4 percent in 2013. As a result of this macro-economic instability, citizens felt an overall deterioration in their quality of life, with 62.6 percent of households remaining below the poverty line, with the highest concentration of poverty in rural areas. The state of the economy has caused a sharp decline of standards in other fields such as education, social and health care.

Environmental factors including climate change and deforestation have affected food security and caused acute malnutrition in the country. Drought has struck communities dependent on rain-fed agriculture, and 63 percent of people use firewood as fuel for cooking. Millions of hectares of land have been destroyed due to serious veld fires, leading to plant and animal species decline.

Long-lasting grievances and the poverty prevalent in communities threaten social cohesion and peace at the local level.

Moreover, in 2005 nearly 700,000 people lost their homes as a result of a government programme code named Murambatsvina (‘remove the dirt’), to rationalise the construction of urban dwellings and to remove shacks which had been illegally constructed. The housing crisis continues today, as there is a severe lack of affordable shelter. This political and socio-economic background provides insight into some root causes of human insecurities in Zimbabwe. Long-lasting grievances and the poverty prevalent in communities threaten social cohesion and peace at the local level. The minimal research in this field shows that conflicts in communities are rooted in deep structural and policy issues that have not been addressed.

As part of the Global Political Agreement (GPA) in 2009, the Government of Zimbabwe recognised the need for healing and reconciliation, and established the Organ for National Healing and Reconciliation (ONHR) More recently, the constitution of Zimbabwe, adopted in 2013, makes provision for the establishment of a National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC), acknowledging the importance of national healing and reconciliation in fostering peace, well-being and development in the country.

A communication and knowledge gap exists between national policymakers and long-standing community practices.

As the country moves towards a national healing and reconciliation process, the emphasis has been on collaborative efforts not only among the government, ONHR and civil society organisations, but also with traditional leadership. It is widely acknowledged that the complexity of Zimbabwean society and politics must be understood within the contexts of historical struggles, and this requires finding a balance between modern and traditional conflict resolution and mediation mechanisms at community levels. However, a communication and knowledge gap exists between national policymakers and long-standing community practices, posing challenges in implementing a nationally-agreed peace and reconciliation programme that is truly representative of all Zimbabweans.
Community perspectives on human security

Interviews with a number of community representatives, including political leaders, church leaders and traditional leaders provide first-hand testimonies of the way that human security is perceived at the community level. Present perceptions of people predominantly from the Nkayi District in Matabeleland in Zimbabwe’s North province, but also from other regions across the country.

THE POLITICAL LEADER
Nicholas Shanda is a senior political leader of ZANU PF in the Nkayi District, Matabeleland North Province, as well as a lay church leader, and Vice Secretary of the Local Peace Committee.

The first, perhaps the most important, personal human security concern I have is the slow pace of development in the area, which almost everybody in the district feels. I would have loved to see the economy performing better and everyone ralling around the plans and programmes that were set by government after the elections.

I am an old man now and naturally fear that I may pass on and not have done enough to secure the future of my dependents. Lack of development poses a threat to human security. Without development there can be no peace. In Nkayi, we are disgruntled because the necessary infrastructure for education, health, transport, etc. is very inadequate especially when compared with developments taking place in other parts of the country. Children have to travel long distances to go to school. The same applies to the long distances people have to travel to ferry patients to the nearest clinic or hospital. Some have died on donkey or ox drawn carts before they got to the nearest hospital.

One of the biggest problems here is the water shortage due to the sinking water table. People are unable to have the standard of living enjoyed by others in other areas. Water is a human right. We rely on a sand abstraction system and this means that when there have been poor rains, which is usually the case, water dries up quickly and we have nothing. We can’t even embark on small income-generating projects.

When I was growing up there were a lot of rivers with water flowing throughout the year, but today there are hardly any such rivers. In the past if one dug a well one did not need to dig very deep before reaching the water table. But today one has to use a drilling machine to find water and it will not be everywhere.

“Water is a human right.”

For me, the issue of climate change has become a human security challenge as it is also responsible for movements of people crowding in areas where they can find water. It is also an environmental issue as livestock also have to walk long distances in search of water and green pastures, and in the process some die and are left to rot in open spaces, polluting the air.

c. Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front party

Sources of insecurity

The accounts shared here demonstrate that human security encompasses a wide range of factors linked to development, social cohesion and peaceful coexistence. The concerns identified by community leaders and members refer for instance to the pace of development, issues of poverty, access to water, food security, environmental degradation and economic opportunities. They also emphasise the importance of women’s empowerment and women’s participation in decision making at the community level. Domestic violence and a history of violence within communities are mentioned. Concerns are raised when it comes to service delivery, health services and education as well as shelter and housing. Finally, some of the interviewees also mention the issues of witchcraft and tribal tensions which affect their community.

These responses came from various areas and there is a growing view that their communities are deliberately marginalised and segregated. The feeling of social ostracism on development, access to water, food security, environmental degradation and livelihoods opportunities resulting in poverty is taken on an ethnic and or regional slant. All the threats to human security mentioned by interviewees could potentially become causes of serious conflicts given the economic challenges faced by the nation.

Resource management and livelihoods

Access to natural resources, and hence livelihood and employment, is central to most interviewees’ concerns. These are linked to social tensions and anti-social behaviour, but also to loss of dignity and disempowerment.

For a senior Movement for Democratic Change – Tsvangirai (MDC-T) political leader and ward Councillor in Nkayi district, the issue of water is very high on his list of human security concerns. As a community leader he is aware and very much concerned that “Most people have no water for domestic use and for subsistence agriculture programmes like irrigation.” Food security is very much connected with water. For him “water is life.” This critical shortage of water “has weighed down heavily on our personal dignity as people when we compare ourselves to other people in other areas.

It hurts when we read in the paper when some political leaders describe us as lazy and failing to take advantage of government programmes when they are the ones who are failing to lift us up by addressing our water challenge.” Water is not an issue to be policted. It has to do with human dignity and is therefore a human security concern for the people of Nkayi.

“Shortage of water has weighed down heavily on our personal dignity.”

A traditional leader from the Nkayi district underlines the same issue: “As a traditional leader, my major concern is that of water and the complaint I get from my subjects every other day. We only have one water pump in the area and it is hardly enough for domestic use and other livelihood purposes.” In Nkayi district, another respondent adds that as a result of the poor rains and inadequate farming inputs, the harvest was poor, resulting in food insecurity. In Chivi, on the other hand, the Secretary to Chief’s Advisory Council laments that: “Livelihoods is a problem as in some areas there was too much rain and farmers lost their produce. We have not been able to assist people who have lost their crop and it is troubling us as traditional leaders.”

A village head in the Chivi district points out the connection between livelihood, employment and social tensions: “Many young people in the area are unemployed thus they are idle and end up involving themselves in socially unacceptable behaviour. I would want to see those who are interested become allocated agricultural land or being assisted to embark on livelihood projects such as nutrition gardens and irrigation schemes.” Similarly, another respondent in Bulawayo adds that: “The major human security threat that I may dwell upon is the closure of industries and the increased rate of unemployment in the city of Bulawayo (which) has also fuelled the increase of burglaries and muggings by unemployed individuals.”

Given the sensitive subject matter, the testimonials have been kept anonymous and the names provided are pseudonyms.

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The interviews reflected on the issues caused by the importation of labour. There are a number of companies that operate in Bulawayo and employ people from the outside. This is a security concern to most residents: “The main question is why the government allows the transfer of human capital across provinces rather than focusing on reducing the unemployment rate at every province.” The manager of a guest house in Nkayi highlights the increased rate of unemployment caused by foreign companies’ ownership of the timber industry. According to her, they do not employ locals but they bring their own people, and this negatively affects the economy in the area. She notes that there are a number of backyard industries such as carpentry, welding, and hairdressing, that, if strengthened, could provide people with an income. A respondent in Siolobela added that, “there is capacity for income-generating projects, but there is no money for start-up capital. Women are running money-lending schemes but they generate very little from them.”

A respondent in Bulawayo points out that: “In order to earn a living, many people resort to various ways, such as trading in second-hand clothes imported from Mozambique. Some resort to illegal border jumping in search of jobs in neighbouring countries with better economies, such as Botswana and South Africa. Some have died in the process swimming across crocodile infested rivers and playing hide and seek with security forces guarding the borders.” He further points out that because of the economic hardships, corruption is rampant in the country and, “What seems to be lacking is the political will to face it head on.”

Economy
Zimbabwe’s financial troubles and the effects of the economic challenges is a frequently cited source of insecurity. The following testimonial from a respondent in Bulawayo illustrates this: “I am scared to think about the future of my children. I have nothing to bequeath to them as I lost every penny that I had saved in the crisis of 2007 to 2008. No matter how much education I might give them, chances of their being employed are very slim with such a high unemployment rate. In 2007 to 2008 the challenge was the hyper-inflation that led to the collapse of the Zimbabwe dollar, but today the challenge comes from deflation. Unlike last time, goods are available on the market but there is very little money in circulation. Those who have money seem to be afraid of keeping it in the bank for fear of a repeat of the 2007 to 2008 experience, where their funds were confiscated by government and up to today have not been returned. This has left many people hurting and angry. They would rather keep their money hidden elsewhere. The vast majority of people are living from hand to mouth and therefore fear for their security and that of their children. I live in fear.”

Public services
A number of issues raised relate to the provision of public services such as housing, health and social welfare. On housing, the authorities’ recent attempt to enforce building standards and remove unauthorised housing, whether for legitimate reasons or not, has resulted in a housing crisis. A resident in Nkayi postulates that: “The local authority intends to destroy homesteads that are surrounding the growth point. It has been said it’s for the purposes of expansion. But this will create a lot of other issues such as homelessness and destruction of people’s livelihoods. This is exacerbated by resource exploitation by foreign companies.”

A female traditional leader in the Nkayi District highlights that “education is a serious matter in our area as there is very little infrastructure. Many times we have had to rely on well-wishers and local businesspeople to build facilities. It is only recently that the first creche was built in our area, and it had to be donated by a local politician. The shortage of resources and infrastructure within the area has caused the community to be worried that it is not a good area for our children to learn, due to the absence of learning facilities, and that this will in turn lessen their life chances.”

In Mashonaland East, another respondent says: “The major human security issue where I reside is shelter and housing. Many people were allocated houses and stands, some in the wetlands and others in areas that were not fully serviced. The problem is that now the local authority is threatening to demolish the houses as they are either on unsuitable or unauthorised land or irregularly built. These are ordinary people who invested their life savings in building homes but are now faced with the threat of homelessness. Some have used their entire life investments to build beautiful and comfortable houses on those stands. They are now threatened by the local authorities with demolition, resulting in homelessness and poverty.”

Related to this housing challenge is the issue of political abuse. “I feel that this housing crisis is triggered by some politicians who, at election times, go out of their way to promise things that they are not really in control of. In the heat of the political moment, they by-pass procedure and we are the ones who bear the brunt at the end of the day. It is really distressing for people to be stressed about shelter and where the next meal will come from and it is shared across Chitungwiza.”

“I am scared to think about the future of my children.”

“Some of the worst political violence has taken place in this district.”
In Mutare, Manicaland province, a councillor talks of how poor health services affect the most vulnerable in society: “I do counselling for orphans in the area who have been left destitute or in the care of elderly grandparents. Most of them lost their parents to HIV/AIDS and now have to head households or go to orphanages. This weighs down on the community as most of these children need to be schooled.” Last but not least are the issues of poverty and corruption. “There is a problem of corrupt local officials who solicit bribes from widows to process their claims. I feel that what drives their behaviour is that the local authority has been failing to pay their salaries for more than six months now and they then have to resort to unscrupulous ways of earning a living.”

Traditional and gender roles
The interviews highlight the sometimes negative effects of traditional or conservative views on human security. On gender roles, some of the interviews illustrate that many men have not as yet accepted equality with women; for many, women must remain subservient to men. The national media often report on women battered regularly by their husbands and some of them are eventually killed. Many women cannot take leadership positions because they believe men are superior to them. Women need to be empowered so that they can claim their rightful place of being equal to men and demand equal treatment and respect for their human dignity. The absence of that recognition should be seen as a human security issue in many communities.

In the Nkayi district, a MDC-T political leader and ward councillor speaks of the problems caused by traditional beliefs in witchcraft. In his community it is “a major source of conflict.” He points out that: “I was once involved in defusing one such incident. The local soccer team which played in the ECLF peace tournament was involved in an incident. The local authority says ‘The community has tended to provide its own security working with community-based organisations, various non-governmental organisations and local peace committees.” Another interviewee in one of the urban suburbs echoes the same sentiments: “I rely on my community for support. For example, in my community we have what we call neighbourhood watch committees. These work on the protection of inhabitants of my suburb. Unfortunately, the police are not doing a good job in terms of protecting civilians; they abuse people and they delay in responding to crime, which makes people vulnerable. The local authority is not giving my community adequate lighting services, and it is when we experience power cuts that the thieves pounce on innocent people.”

In coping with sources of insecurity, Zimbabweans look to the state, to their communities and to traditional leadership, with varying expectations and results. On the question as to who people look up to for their security, one female respondent says “The community has tended to provide its own security working with community-based organisations, various non-governmental organisations and local peace committees.” Another interviewee in one of the urban suburbs echoes the same sentiments: “I rely on my community for support. For example, in my community we have what we call neighbourhood watch committees. These work on the protection of inhabitants of my suburb. Unfortunately, the police are not doing a good job in terms of protecting civilians; they abuse people and they delay in responding to crime, which makes people vulnerable. The local authority is not giving my community adequate lighting services, and it is when we experience power cuts that the thieves pounce on innocent people.”

“Out of 33 traditional leaders in the area, only three of us are women.”

Reflecting on women’s security
Both male and female respondents raised the issue of the role and security of women.

*"Our area is still a patriarchal community and women seem to fear to venture into areas of leadership. I think the problem is now psychological as there are no real barriers in their way. We encourage them but maybe culture is a hindrance."

*"Gender is a serious human security factor in the community. Out of 33 traditional leaders in the area, only three of us are women. Men traditionally take us for granted and many are not even pleased that we were made traditional leaders though it has been improving slightly. Such a patriarchal attitude is not good for the dignity of women and it sidelines them in playing an equal role in community development."

*"Women in our area are not responsive to taking up leadership positions. If you are an outsider you might get the wrong impression that women are oppressed or undermined here but that is not the case. For some reason they shy away from taking the lead and prefer to be led by men. We try very hard to push them to participate in community platforms."

*"There are many instances of violent cases like assault, public nuisance and domestic violence. I feel that some of the issues are to do with endemic disrespect for women. The traditional courts are always inundated with such cases. I also deal with some of the cases personally at home."

*"I work with widows and these are some of the most insecure and vulnerable people in the community. They face a lot of problems in accessing their pensions or those of their deceased spouses. Most of them are elderly and struggle to gather the paperwork. Some struggle to transfer their deceased spouses’ properties into their names. Commercial sex workers are also vulnerable as they are arrested all the time. Even innocent women are arrested in leisure centres for alleged prostitution."

Security providers and empowerment

In the absence of a strong security infrastructure provided by the state, community-based human security strategies have emerged, building on traditional roles and networks of faith and community leaders. Although these roles are not without their own challenges, they also present great potential to contribute to human security through their deep-rooted presence in Zimbabwe’s diverse society. The following sections elaborate on the role of traditional leadership and explore the potential of community-based local peace committees.

Traditional leadership
Traditional leaders, today referred to as chiefs, were the rulers and custodians of the land and tradition before colonialism. British colonial rule drastically reduced the powers of the traditional leaders to eliminate traditional forms of leadership and replace it with a ‘modern’ system.

“Some of our subjects feel insecure in their areas especially if they are viewed as hostile to the political persuasion of the local traditional leader.”

This has failed to date as the traditional leadership, particularly the chiefs, continue to wield a great deal of power and influence over all their subjects despite legislation and efforts to reduce it. Over the decades, traditional leaders have insisted on keeping their role as the custodians of the land and the traditions of their people. The attainment of Zimbabwe’s independence in 1980 did not do much to change their status as legislated by the colonial powers.

Many Zimbabweans, particularly among rural residents who form the majority of the population, believe that traditional leaders are responsible for the safety of their subjects and must ensure that all their subjects live in peace. Modern political systems have undermined the institution of traditional leaders. One of the few female traditional leaders in Zimbabwe says: “As traditional leaders, we are usually divided along political party lines as a result of interference by political parties in our traditional duties, and many of us find ourselves unable to serve our people objectively. Some of our subjects feel insecure in their areas especially if they are viewed as hostile to the political persuasion of the local traditional leader.” As traditional leaders they are supposed to be non-partisan in order to command the respect of all its subjects in the community. Given the influence traditional leaders wield in their...
“Many people in the area feel that we are marginalised with regards to national development programmes.”

THE CHURCH LEADER
Mikhaili Hoibe is a member in the Brethren in Christ Church and is based in Gwanda in the Matabeleland South Province.

We are afflicted by drought almost every year in our area. This leads to general hunger and poverty. People are unable to feed their families and to take the children to school because they are unable to earn a livelihood. I think what is required is the construction of dams and boreholes. People in the community also need to be capacitated with agricultural knowledge and expertise. This will also enable the young people to have livelihoods and make it difficult for them to be abused by politicians for violent missions.

Gwanda is an area which is populated by various ethnic groups including the Ndebele, the Sotho, Venda, and the Shona people. I usually witness clashes of interests among these groups. Each of these communities wants to assert their authority in their areas where they are influential.

Many people in the area feel that we are marginalised with regards to national development programmes. They feel that because they are from Matabeleland, we do not matter much in the national picture. We have poor road networks and generally we lag behind in development. We hear about loans for youth – we assist our youth to school because they are unable to earn a livelihood. I think what is required is the construction of dams and boreholes.

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infrastructure for peace’ which has the potential of complementing and feeding into the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission.

LPCs are structures established by community members to be responsible for peace within their community. As a practical response to ensure that peace prevails, communities choose members to constitute a committee. The composition of LPCs varies but includes civil servants, church leaders, traditional leaders, state security sector actors, political party leaders, women, youth and other stakeholders such as organisations operating at the community level. LPCs build peace in their communities through creating dialogue spaces where people engage each other in search of solutions to their challenges. They also facilitate peacebuilding sessions. In some situations, they mediate conflict and act as early warning systems and work towards addressing human security concerns in their areas.

Aaron Chimiti, a member of the Kraal Head’s advisory committee who chairs the ward Local Peace Committee, says the LPCs have helped to keep the Kraal Head’s advisory committee intact. Through the conciliatory work he has been doing, drawing on the skills he acquired from the trainings, he has been able to resolve community conflicts.

“It has changed the way we do business in the local traditional court. If it were not for this programme, there are people who could have been expelled from the chief’s advisory committee. I played a conciliatory role to block the expulsion.” Chimiti adds that he has learned to respect the law through the peacebuilding trainings. “They taught me never to take the law into my own hands as I am not a lawyer, a magistrate or other trained officer of the law. People in the community know that I am a trained peacebuilder and I am seconded to most cases that require conciliation in the community.”

A respondent in Chivi reflects on how the LPCs have been able to address the challenge of peace. There have been a lot of violent conflicts between political parties, particularly towards election time. We are only starting to manage it now that we have structures such as the Local Peace Committee. After attending the training, we agreed to form an LPC consisting of members of our community from the different backgrounds and political persuasions. It is through our committee that we are now able to manage some conflicts. There are also incidents of domestic violence that we deal with as LPCs as well as traditional courts.” Police in Nkayi have reported a significant reduction of crime and violence since the launch of the programme. The committee was set up as a purely community initiative to address the specific peace challenges in the community. In recent testimony, Munodawafa Dube of the Zimbabwe Republic Police said that the committee had seen a noticeable change in police records thanks to the LPC’s work on mitigating political conflicts. “The Mutasa for Peace Committee has made our policing work easier. In the run up to the elections last year we hardly got any serious cases of politically motivated violence as compared to previous elections due to the peace work of this committee. The more common cases these days are domestic violence, boundary disputes and public nuisance cases. I think we have reached a point where we can refer some cases to the committee. I urge them to set up a reference desk in a public area. We work very well with them and they never do anything without the involvement of the police.”

A spokesperson from the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare in Mutasa also noted the decrease in injuries caused by politically motivated violence at the district referral hospital: “At the hospitals in the district we have become accustomed to treating people with axes in their heads. We have seen some of the ugliest wounds caused by all sorts of dangerous weapons, mainly due to political violence towards the 2008 elections. This has changed drastically in the community as we have been seeing fewer cases of politically motivated violence. People say that this committee, with members from various parties, has played a role in bringing down the violence.”
Human security issues facing many Zimbabweans are multifaceted and ever more complex, as they have economic, socio-political, historical and environmental aspects. Addressing these issues through a national healing and reconciliation approach enables local communities to actively engage and seek solutions alongside authorities and security providers.

While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, strengthening the existing national peacebuilding efforts is one way to address various human security issues, as the integrative and cross-cutting nature of peacebuilding addresses almost all the issues discussed in this report. Recommendations to national policymakers and their partners are as follows:

• Operationalise the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission to ensure a nationally-agreed healing and reconciliation process, with particular attention and measures to include marginalised groups such as women, youth, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities.

• Launch advocacy and sensitising campaigns not only to ensure consistent and strategic collaborative plans among key stakeholders, but also to inform the general population of current peacebuilding mechanisms and the importance of further collective efforts for peace.

• Strengthen the peace architecture’s building blocks such as the Local Peace Committees (LPCs). LPCs represent the diversity of their communities and include participants such as civil servants, church leaders, traditional leaders, state security sector actors, political leaders, and most importantly women and youths. Further strengthening community-based conflict resolution forums can positively increase the political participation of all these groups in their communities.

• Implement community-based disaster risk management mechanisms in order to prevent and mitigate the risk of natural and/or manmade disasters in order to build community resilience against potential conflict and shocks. This could be done for instance through the Local Peace Committees.

• Implement community-based activities such as income-generation projects to empower vulnerable populations through which the communities can benefit from economic empowerment as well as cohesion-building.

• Increase collaboration between civil society, faith-based organisations, development partners and government departments around human security issues.

LPCs represent the diversity of their communities; further strengthening community-based conflict resolution forums can positively increase the political participation of all groups in their communities.

Conclusion and recommendations

The authors work for the Ecumenical Church Leaders Forum (ECLF), which is a grouping of Christian leaders from Zimbabwe’s church umbrella bodies that brings together a variety of church leaders at all levels, both clergy and lay, male and female from all denominations. ECLF’s mission is to contribute towards the creation and sustenance of a peaceful, just and democratic nation by capacitating and empowering the entire Church leadership for peacebuilding through dialogue and constructive engagement with the motto ‘Church and community working together for peace’. ECLF is a member of the Southern Africa network of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC).