Optimising Open Distance Learning (ODL) benefits in peace building and conflict resolution

Edith Karimanzira
eskarimanzira@gmail.com
Tichaona Mapolisa
tichmap@gmail.com
Zimbabwe Open University

Abstract

Peace-building and conflict resolution are the most sought desires by any development oriented society. It is common knowledge that development brings about peace. It is through education that communities accomplish peace. Six participants were selected using expert sampling from two criterion-sampled universities in Zimbabwe. In-depth interview method was used to generate data. The study found that increasing access to ODL African citizens of diverse backgrounds, cultures and classes is one of the crucial means of optimising ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa. It also established that ODL keeps Africans actively engaged in the learning as they learn to put theory into practice in their bid to solve problems that cause conflict. The study concluded that optimisation of ODL benefits in peace-building and conflict resolution in Africa is neither context nor culture-bound. It also deduced that conflict situations can be avoided if optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa. The study’s first recommendation was that ODL institutions need to accommodate diverse stakeholder satisfaction in order to buttress optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa. Second, proper exposure, promotion and recognition of ODL Peace, Leadership and Conflict Resolution products by the state and its arms (parliament, civil service and the judiciary), and other organizations are key pillars necessary for the optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa. Third, in recent future, similar studies need to be conducted using comparative case studies as a pre-condition to surveys.

Key Words: peace-building, violence, ignorance, ODL, optimisation of ODL benefits

Introduction

Peace-building and conflict resolution always exist in symbiosis with each other. The two entities co-exist very well in the absence of terrorism. Conflict occurs when two or more parties believe that their interests are incompatible, express hostile attitudes or take action that damages other parties’ ability to pursue their interests. It becomes violent when parties no longer seek to attain their goals peacefully, but resort instead to violence in one form or another (Barbero, Bayne, Brusset, Campbell, Jos de la Haye, & Leonhardt, n.d.). According to (Green, Buxton& Salonious-Pasternak, 2006, p.12): Over the last fifty years, it is possible to identify a number of phases in the character of armed conflicts in Africa, including the following:

- Liberation struggles and conflicts directly associated with the ending of colonial rule.
- Armed rebellions and military coups against weak or authoritarian regimes.
- Cold war or (especially in Francophone Africa) post-colonial ‘overlay’ on politics and tensions in Africa, combining external suppression of conflicts or
destabilisation by armed proxies for reasons of wider international politics.

• Civil wars and complex contemporary conflicts associated with weak or ‘shadow’ states; the ‘resource curse’; youth alienation, or impacts of neighbouring conflicts.

• ‘Post-conflict’ armed violence and continued instability.

Some studies have attempted to link gender equality to peace-building and conflict resolution. Gender equality brings to peace-building new degrees of democratic inclusiveness, faster and more durable economic growth and human and social capital recovery (Klot, 2007). Indeed, peace-building may well offer the single greatest opportunity to redress gender inequities and injustices of the past while setting new precedents for the future. But these opportunities can be enhanced significantly – or constrained – by how the international community sets its priorities for recovery and uses its resources for peace-building (Integrating Gender into the World Bank’s Work: A Strategy for Action, January 2002 in Klot, 2007).

According to Onslow, Schoofs and Maguire (2010, p. 1), UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 recognised, as a matter of international peace and security, the urgent need to address women’s participation in peace processes and peace-building as well as the need to protect women and girls from egregious violations of their rights during and after violent conflict. Subsequent UNSCRs, regional agreements and declarations have underlined these imperatives. Despite these resolutions and numerous statements and commitments at global, regional and national levels, however, women are still largely absent from peace processes and peace-building initiatives, and today’s conflicts are characterised by widespread sexual violence against women and girls.

What appears to be missing is how well ODL benefits peace-building and conflict resolution in wake of aforementioned widespread sexual violence against women and girls in Africa. This is because violent conflict is one of the biggest barriers to development in many of the world’s poorest countries. Of the 40 poorest countries in the world, 24 are either in the midst of armed conflict or have only recently emerged from it.

The role of education in conflict-affected countries has received increased attention during the past decade because of its significance for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) related to education (UNICEF, 2011). Earlier on, there has been an increasing awareness that Education for All (EFA) goals will only be achieved through success in accessing children in conflict affected contexts, who are among the hardest to reach (Save the Children Alliance 2006 in UNICEF, 2011).

Education is perhaps the most important tool for human development and the eradication of poverty (UNICEF, 2011). It is the means by which successive generations develop the values, knowledge and skills for their personal health and safety and for future political, economic, social and cultural development. This may be one reason why the MDGs place so much emphasis on achieving universal, free and compulsory primary education through Education for All (EFA) (UNICEF, 2011).

With regards to offering conflict-sensitive education, according to UNICEF (2011, p. 19).

Throughout the past decade, an increasing number of studies have highlighted aspects of education that have implications for conflict (Bush and Salterelli 2000; Smith and Vaux 2003; Buckland 2004; Davies 2004; and Tawil and Harley 2004) and suggest a number of reasons why we should be cautious about how education is provided. Firstly, education may be perceived politically as a powerful
tool for ideological development. This can take many forms, ranging from the use of education in the development of liberal ideas, to nation building and, in extreme cases, political indoctrination. Secondly, education may be perceived as an instrument for providing the knowledge and skills necessary for economic development and societal mobility. However, this may or may not be include equity concerns, thus further excluding certain groups from economic and social benefits that education can provide. Thirdly, education is a means by which social and cultural values are transmitted from generation to generation and, depending on the values concerned, these may convey negative stereotypes or encourage attitudes that explicitly or implicitly condone violence or generate conflict.

The above excerpt recognises the role of general education in optimising peace-building and conflict resolution. It however lacks context-specificity regarding the extent to which ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution could be optimised.

Both men and women have the potential for peacemaking and the responsibility to build and keep peace. The women, however, seem more creative and effective in waging peace ... It is the women’s emotional strength to transcend pain and suffering, and their predisposition to peace that provide them with greater potentials for peacemaking (Garcia, 1994, p.45 in Munuve, n.d.). It is therefore often the case that ideas about some of women’s distinctive qualities (whether these are thought to be biologically or socially determined) become identified with the way forward in peace building, and strategies therefore focus on ways to enhance, support and extend the work that women are thought to be well-equipped to undertake (Munuve, n.d.).

In the light of the foregoing previous research, it appears that the optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa is worth exploring, hence the need to conduct this study. The intent of this study was therefore to determine the degree to which ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution could be optimised in Africa. The focus was on generating data from interviewing Peace, Leadership and Conflict lecturers in selected two universities in Zimbabwe.

Materials and methods

Qualitative research methodology guided the conduct of the study. It was selected for its ability to enable participants to provide the researchers’ with lived experiences regarding optimization of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution. Explanatory case study method was used to carry out the study in order to explain the studied phenomenon. Use of explanatory case study was meant to explain in detail how best optimization of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution would be done in Zimbabwe, Africa. Two research sites were selected using criterion sampling since they had lecturers with research sought knowledge about optimization of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa in the context of Zimbabwe. Six participants (3 males and 3 females), were selected using expert sampling in order to tap relevant knowledge about degree to which ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution could be optimised in Africa with particular reference to Zimbabwe. These were lecturers who taught Peace, Leadership and Conflict Resolution in selected two universities in Zimbabwe. The participants were interviewed thrice apiece between February 2016 and August 2016. This was part of member checking meant to check the consistency of participants’ responses over time (Gray, 2009). The generated data were coded and analysed by means of thematic content analysis as suggested by Silverman (2006). Participants were coded P1-P6. The
odd numbered participants were from the same ODL institution (P1, P3, P5) in Zimbabwe. Participants coded with even numbers belonged to another semi-ODL institution (P2, P4, P6). Data were presented descriptively and interpreted on the basis of direct quotes from the participants which concretised the studied phenomenon in Zimbabwe. The use of direct quotes presented the researchers with an opportunity to use descriptive and analytical quotes to vividly interpret optimization of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution.

Discussion

The discussion of findings was guided by the following themes:
1. Optimising ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa.
2. Challenges associated with optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa.
3. Measures to alleviate challenges associated with optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa.

Optimising ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa

The findings revealed a host of strategies to optimising ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa. To illustrate that optimisation, here are examples of the participants’ perceptions:

Increasing access to ODL African citizens of diverse backgrounds, cultures and classes is one of the crucial means of optimising ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa (P1).

ODL keeps Africans actively engaged in the learning as they learn to put theory into practice in their bid to solve problems that cause conflict (P2).

Reaching out the conflict torn states with ODL preaches the gospel for observing and spreading peace, unity, amity and harmony (P3).

ODL enables Africans to learn from each other and how other people living outside Africa manage conflict in the home, family, work, church, country, region and the continent at large (P4).

ODL produces tolerant compliant products who fit in well in societal and labour, as well as political roles, which culminate in the preservation of peace building and conflict resolution in Africa (P5).

The findings go beyond previous research findings by UNICEF (2011) on the role of education in general peace building and conflict resolution in Africa. According to UNICEF (2011, p. 19),

Throughout the past decade, an increasing number of studies have highlighted aspects of education that have implications for conflict (Bush and Salterelli 2000; Smith and Vaux 2003; Buckland 2004; Davies 2004; and Tawil and Harley 2004) and suggest a number of reasons why we should be cautious about how education is provided. Firstly, education may be perceived politically as a powerful tool for ideological development. This can take many forms, ranging from the use of education in the development of liberal ideas, to nation building and, in extreme cases, political indoctrination. Secondly, education may be perceived as an instrument for providing the knowledge and skills necessary for economic development and societal mobility. However, this may or may not be include equity concerns, thus further excluding certain groups from economic and social benefits that education can provide. Thirdly, education is a means by which social and cultural values are transmitted from generation to generation and, depending on the values concerned, these may convey negative stereotypes or encourage attitudes that explicitly or implicitly condone violence or generate conflict.
An analysis of six findings and the literature enables the researchers to come up with three positions regarding the optimisation of ODL peace building and conflict resolution in Africa. First, the benefits of ODL in enhancing peace building and conflict resolution in Africa span across boundaries. They are neither context nor culture bound. Second, readiness to learn from what other successful people do in peace-building and conflict resolution in Africa, is a cornerstone making people realise how ODL optimises peace-building and conflict resolution in Africa. Third, virtues of tolerance, forgiveness and reconciliation are spill over benefits of ODL that will have been massified in African countries that cherish building and conflict resolution in Africa.

Challenges associated with optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa

Participants also gave their own share of challenges regarding optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa. Prominent pronouncements were:

Viewing the quality of ODL education programmes and products with suspicion by people with a conventional education background undermines efforts to enhance optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa (P1).

Lack of exposure of products of Peace, Leadership and Conflict Resolution to platforms such as media and conflict situations that deal with peace-building and conflict resolution militates against optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa (P2; P4).

Lack of promotion opportunities for ODL products to positions of power in the army, police, judiciary and parliament draws back the gains of optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa (P3, P6).

Violent-prone countries in Africa are deterrent to optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa (P5). Conflict situations have a tendency of minimising and eroding optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa (P6).

The preceding perceptions appear to be compatible with Onslow’s et al. (2010, p.4) findings, although the findings are devoid of ODL.

First, peace-building in conflict-affected contexts involves long-term processes of strengthening the capacity of society and governance institutions to manage and resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner. Second, international efforts to improve governance in fragile and conflict-affected societies are, therefore, geared towards the development of more democratic, transparent and inclusive governance institutions, including the rule of law.

On the same note, conflict becomes violent when parties no longer seek to attain their goals peacefully, but resort instead to violence in one form or another (Barbero, Bayne, Brusset, Campbell, Jos de la Haye, & Leonhardt, n.d.). Also, Gender equality brings to peace-building new degrees of democratic inclusiveness, faster and more durable economic growth and human and social capital recovery (Klot, 2007). Indeed, peace-building may well offer the single greatest opportunity to redress gender inequities and injustices of the past while setting new precedents for the future (Klot, 2007). The optimisation of ODL benefits need strengthening during conflict situations if ever ODL is going to be appreciated in Africa, especially, by enemies of ODL. The ODL enemies need to be convinced very much about ODL’s capacity to contribute to peace-building in Africa. This is a possibility because most ODL institutions have quality assurance units and regulatory authorities from the parent Ministries that monitor the standards of programmes on offer by the ODL institutions.
Measures to alleviate challenges associated with optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa

Related to challenges associated with optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa, are measures to alleviate challenges associated with optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa. In suggesting such measures, participants asserted:

Viewing the quality of ODL education programmes and products with suspicion by people with a conventional education background undermines efforts to enhance optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa could be minimized making enemies of ODL key stakeholders ODL institutions (P1).

People with a conventional education background might be invited to become members of the university council or even to present papers at international and local research conferences, symposia and workshops (P2).

Opportunities to expose and promote ODL Peace, Leadership and Conflict Resolution products further enhance optimisation of ODL benefits in peace-building and conflict resolution in Africa (P3).

Proper recognition of ODL Peace, Leadership and Conflict Resolution products makes the African societies appreciate the role of ODL in peace-building and conflict resolution in Africa (P4).

While conflict situations are inevitable, they can be avoided for the good of optimisation of ODL benefits in peace-building and conflict resolution in Africa (P5). In times of conflict, it might be necessary to urge conflict parties to engage tried and tested conflict resolution strategies to enable mutual conflict resolution and prevention to prevail (P6).

The above findings appear to add new insights into existing knowledge regarding optimisation of ODL benefits in peace-building and conflict resolution in Africa since most of existing literature focuses on general education rather than what ODL does to promote peace-building and conflict resolution in Africa. What can also be read from the foregoing findings is the fact that measures to enhance optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution are context-bound. They vary according to environmental contexts that obtain in a country. Such contexts include political, social, economic, cultural, technological and scientific.

Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, the researchers came up with six positions. First, optimisation of ODL benefits in peace-building and conflict resolution in Africa is neither context nor culture-bound. Second, ODL promotes peace-building and conflict resolution in Africa whenever its programmes are offered in the host country. Third, optimisation of ODL benefits in peace-building and conflict resolution in Africa is let down by lack of exposure and promotion ODL Peace, Leadership and Conflict Resolution products. Fourth, violence in some African countries defeats the whole purpose of peace-building and conflict resolution, although violence situations sometimes provide fertile opportunities for conflicting parties to come with practical solutions to curb violence. Fifth, enemies and competitors of ODL need to be neutralised by making ODL stand out in the offering of programmes. Sixth, conflict situations can be avoided if optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa.

Three recommendations emerged from the study. First, ODL institutions need to accommodate diverse stakeholder satisfaction in order to buttress optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict
resolution in Africa. Second, proper exposure, promotion and recognition of ODL Peace, Leadership and Conflict Resolution products by the state and its arms (parliament, civil service and the judiciary), and other organisations are key pillars necessary for the optimisation of ODL benefits in peace building and conflict resolution in Africa. Third, in recent future, similar studies need to be conducted using comparative case studies as a pre-condition to surveys, longitudinal studies and cross-sectional studies.

References


