

Enhancing Cultural Diplomacy for Sustainable Peace in the Kenya–Ethiopia Border Region

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Abstract

This research study investigates the critical role of cultural diplomacy in fostering sustainable peaceful relations within the complex and often volatile Kenya-Ethiopia border region, an area historically characterised by resource competition, ethnic tensions, and cross-border insecurity. Despite strong cultural, linguistic, and familial ties among cross-border communities, the region continues to experience recurring conflicts driven by resource competition, political misunderstandings, and inadequate institutional coordination. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Joseph Nye's Soft Power Theory and perspectives from liberalism in international relations, the study explores how cultural exchange, shared heritage, and community-based diplomacy can strengthen cross-border cooperation and reduce tensions. A phenomenological research design was employed to capture the lived experiences of 130 participants, including local leaders, community members, government officials, and representatives of non-governmental organisations engaged in peacebuilding initiatives. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and focus group discussions and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that effective cultural diplomacy in the border region requires three key strategies: leveraging digital platforms and youth engagement to counter misinformation and promote shared narratives, integrating formal government structures with traditional leadership systems to enhance legitimacy and participation, and linking cultural initiatives with sustainable economic development through heritage-based tourism and cross-border trade. The study concludes that institutionalising culturally grounded diplomacy and strengthening community participation can transform shared cultural identity into a strategic tool for long-term peace and cooperation between Kenya and Ethiopia.

Keywords: Cross-border cooperation, cultural diplomacy, grassroots engagement, Kenya–Ethiopia border, peacebuilding, sustainable peace.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of sustainable peace in border regions, particularly those with a history of conflict and competition over scarce resources, presents a complex challenge for international relations and peacebuilding scholarship. The Kenya–Ethiopia Border has historically experienced recurrent insecurity associated with pastoral mobility, cattle rustling, and disputes over water and grazing land among communities such as the Borana, Gabra, and Turkana. For instance, violent clashes in and around Moyale in 2005, 2012, and 2018 resulted in deaths, the displacement of households, and the disruption of cross-border trade and mobility.

Reports by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development indicate that pastoral conflicts in the Horn of Africa have displaced thousands of people and contributed to chronic instability in frontier regions. In response, governments of Kenya and Ethiopia have implemented several policy measures aimed at strengthening cross-border peace and security, including joint security patrols and regional initiatives supported by the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development to promote border cooperation and conflict management. However, traditional state-centric approaches have often failed to address the nuanced grassroots dynamics that characterise these frontier spaces. An emerging body of literature, however, points to cultural diplomacy as a potent, albeit underutilised, tool for fostering lasting peaceful relations.

This review synthesises key scholarly contributions to construct a framework for understanding how cultural diplomacy can be strategically enhanced in the Kenya–Ethiopia border region. It argues that effective peacebuilding in this context requires a paradigm shift: from viewing borders as mere conflict zones to recognising them as dynamic spaces of opportunity, operationalised through civil society and grounded in indigenous cultural practices. This argument is built upon five core ideas: the foundational theory and cautionary notes on African cultural diplomacy (Akanmidu, 2021), the reconceptualisation of borderlands as zones of opportunity (Bach, 2020), the critical role of Track Three civil society actors (Bereketeab, 2019), the peacebuilding power of

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (Mirzeler & Osamba, 2022), and the empirical validation of grassroots mechanisms among the Borana (Hagmann & Mulugeta, 2018).

The theoretical foundation for employing cultural diplomacy in Africa is both promising and fraught with complexity. Akanmidu (2021) provides a critical examination of cultural diplomacy as a peacebuilding tool across the continent, positing that its potential lies in its ability to build bridges and foster mutual understanding where political and economic interventions have failed. The core idea from Akanmidu's work is a dual-edged assessment: while cultural diplomacy can be a powerful soft power resource, its effectiveness is severely undermined when it is co-opted as a top-down, propagandistic tool of the state, or when it engages in superficial, tokenistic exchanges that fail to resonate with local populations.

Akanmidu (2021) warns that such misapplications can exacerbate existing tensions by creating perceptions of cultural imperialism or inauthenticity. For the Kenya–Ethiopia border, a region marked by ethnic heterogeneity and suspicion of external actors due to repeated security interventions and historical marginalisation, this caution is paramount. Therefore, any strategy must be designed to be genuinely collaborative, deeply rooted in local realities, and aimed at mutual enrichment rather than one-way influence. This foundational critique sets the stage for exploring more nuanced and community-centric models that can avoid these pitfalls and unlock the true potential of cultural engagement for sustainable peace.

To move beyond the pitfalls identified by Akanmidu (2021), it is first necessary to reframe the perception of the border region itself. Bach (2020) offers a crucial conceptual lens by arguing that borderlands should be understood not as peripheral, static, and inherently violent spaces but as zones of opportunity, dynamic frontiers characterised by interaction, exchange, and cooperation. This perspective directly challenges the securitised, state-centric view that often dominates policy discourse. Bach (2020) argues that border communities possess their own agency, developing unique social, economic, and cultural systems that

transcend the artificiality of the political border. In the context of the Kenya–Ethiopia frontier, cross-border trade networks, pastoral migration routes, and shared ethnic identities have historically facilitated cooperation despite periodic violence. For example, pastoral mobility agreements among Borana and Gabra communities have long allowed livestock movement across the border during drought periods. Viewing this region as a zone of opportunity, therefore, shifts the focus from merely managing conflict to actively cultivating cooperation. It suggests that the most effective strategies for peace will not simply emerge from policy decisions in Nairobi or Addis Ababa but from empowering the communities that inhabit and shape the borderland space.

If borderlands are re-envisioned as zones of opportunity, the next question concerns which actors are best positioned to cultivate this potential for peace. Bereketeab (2019) provides a compelling answer through his analysis of diplomacy tracks in the Horn of Africa, emphasising the importance of Track Three diplomacy peacebuilding initiatives led by grassroots and civil society organisations. While Track One diplomacy between states is often rigid and politically constrained, and Track Two diplomacy among elites is limited in scope, Track Three actors, such as community-based organisations, religious leaders, and women’s groups, possess local legitimacy and social reach.

These actors can operationalise cultural diplomacy through practical initiatives such as cross-border cultural festivals, dialogue forums, and youth exchange programs. In the Kenya–Ethiopia border context, civil society organisations have already facilitated peace dialogues among pastoral communities and supported intercommunal reconciliation initiatives following violent conflicts. Strengthening such actors, therefore, represents a practical strategy for institutionalising cultural diplomacy at the grassroots level and building resilient social networks that support peace beyond formal diplomatic agreements.

The effectiveness of these Track Three actors, however, depends on the authenticity and cultural relevance of their initiatives. Mirzeler and Osamba (2022) highlight the importance of Indigenous

Knowledge Systems (IKS) in peacebuilding in Northern Kenya. According to their analysis, traditional practices such as oral traditions, reconciliation rituals, and the authority of elder councils represent sophisticated conflict resolution systems developed over generations. These mechanisms carry deep cultural legitimacy and are widely respected by local communities. For example, councils of elders among Borana and Gabra pastoralists often mediate disputes over grazing land and water resources using customary law and negotiated compensation agreements. Integrating such indigenous systems into cultural diplomacy strategies can strengthen peacebuilding efforts by aligning them with existing social structures and cultural values. Rather than relying solely on externally designed peace programs, policymakers and civil society actors can support cross-border elder dialogues, cultural storytelling initiatives, and traditional reconciliation ceremonies that emphasise shared history and mutual coexistence.

Finally, empirical evidence demonstrates that these grassroots and culturally grounded mechanisms are not merely theoretical concepts but already function effectively within the border region. Hagmann and Mulugeta (2018) document how the Borana community, whose members live on both sides of the Kenya–Ethiopia border, manages conflict through traditional institutions and trans-border social networks. Their research shows that the Borana maintain cross-border mobility agreements for pastoralists, shared grazing arrangements during droughts, and clan-based mediation structures that resolve disputes without direct state intervention.

These informal governance systems illustrate how cultural norms, kinship ties, and customary law sustain cooperation across the border despite political boundaries. Consequently, strategies aimed at enhancing cultural diplomacy in the region should focus on identifying, supporting, and scaling up these existing grassroots mechanisms rather than replacing them with entirely new structures. By recognising border communities as active agents of peace and by strengthening indigenous cultural practices, cultural diplomacy can become a powerful and sustainable tool for promoting long-term peaceful relations in the Kenya–Ethiopia borderland.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite the potential for a harmonious relationship in the Kenya–Ethiopia Border region, characterised by prospects for effective conflict resolution, economic cooperation, and sustainable resource management, the reality is frequently marked by cross-border tensions, localised violence, and periodic diplomatic strain. Communities living around frontier towns such as Moyale share deep linguistic, cultural, and kinship ties, yet conflicts related to pastoral mobility, competition for grazing land, and access to water resources continue to disrupt peaceful coexistence (Hagmann & Mulugeta, 2018; Mirzeler & Osamba, 2022).

Studies on borderland governance in the Horn of Africa indicate that recurring clashes among pastoral groups are often aggravated by weak state presence, environmental stress, and policy frameworks that inadequately address community-level grievances (Bach, 2020; Bereketeab, 2019). Although governments in Kenya and Ethiopia, together with regional bodies such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development and the African Union, have implemented political and economic initiatives aimed at strengthening cross-border cooperation, these approaches have often struggled to bridge social mistrust and historical grievances among communities (Bereketeab, 2019).

One promising but underutilised strategy for addressing these challenges is cultural diplomacy, which emphasises cultural exchange, shared heritage, and people-to-people engagement as tools for building trust and fostering long-term cooperation (Akanmidu, 2021). Given the strong traditional, linguistic, and familial connections that exist across the border, cultural diplomacy has significant potential to promote peaceful coexistence. However, its application in the region remains sporadic and poorly institutionalised, revealing a critical need for a systematic framework that integrates indigenous cultural practices, grassroots participation, and community dialogue to achieve sustainable peace in the Kenya–Ethiopia borderland.

1.2 Research Question

This study seeks to address the research question: how can cultural diplomacy be reinforced, and can

that guarantee peaceful relations in the long term along the Kenya- Ethiopia border.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Cultural Diplomacy Strategies

Cultural diplomacy is a practice that has been known to be influential in the international relations and the international understanding as well as the international conflict reduction. Over the past years, scholars have underlined the role of cultural diplomacy as a tool of promoting a more sustainable peaceful relations particularly in the African context where cultural diversity contributes a lot in the development of diplomatic interaction. Nonetheless, as the idea of cultural diplomacy as a peacebuilding tool has become popular, the urgency to investigate the particular approaches that can increase its efficiency, specifically the process of long-term and sustainable peace.

Within the African context, cultural diplomacy has been put in perspective as an essential instrument of enhancing peace, stability and regional integration. Bensouda (2016) notes that the African Union (AU) has acknowledged the opportunities of cultural diplomacy fostering peaceful relationships by establishing frameworks of cooperation between African countries. An example of such is the African Renaissance that highlights the importance of African countries rediscovering and advancing their cultural background as a tool of establishing solidarity and collaboration among member states (Bensouda, 2016). The cultural reawakening strategy is set to create a sense of group belonging, which is one of the elements of permanent peace. The importance of culture in the context of diplomatic relations can be specifically relevant to areas like East Africa, where ethnic diversity and historical disputes demand new approaches to reconciliation and cooperation across borders. Bensouda (2016) also observes that cultural diplomacy is significant to seal the divide between African countries and the rest of the world, so that a more inclusive approach to peace building and conflict resolution could be approached.

One could also suggest that the focus on cultural diplomacy as a means of peace building is expressed by Nyamnjoh (2017), who discusses the role of African languages, traditions, and values to reinforce the diplomatic relationship. Nyamnjoh maintains that the

strategic application of the indigenous languages in diplomatic speech could bring about more tolerant and significant dialogue among the various cultural groups in the African states, and between the African states and the outside forces. Encouraging the African languages in the diplomatic field is considered to be a significant measure of improving the cultural knowledge and lessening the language barriers that tend to cause misunderstandings and conflicts. In her study, Nyamnjoh demonstrates that promoting the use of local language in international forums can also enhance the national identity and pride, which is a contributor to social cohesion and peace among the diverse African communities. Through the promotion of the use of native languages in cultural diplomacy, East African countries can establish forums through which political and ethnic boundaries can be overcome, and cooperation can be achieved through common respect and understanding of the culture.

Although these strategies provide much insight into the importance of culture in diplomacy, there is still a gap in knowledge of how to incorporate the traditional cultural diplomacy practice into formal governmental systems. An example is the case as observed by Akinwale (2019), in most cases, African countries cannot replicate their local cultural diplomacy projects into tangible, lasting results because the institutional support and coordination between the grassroots and national diplomatic activities are lacking. Akinwale (2019) recommends that cultural diplomacy should be more institutionalised, meaning that governments should create special cultural diplomacy offices at their foreign ministries that can liaise with local communities and culture agencies. This would make sure that cultural diplomacy is not an ad-hoc operation but a systematic, regular, and coordinated endeavour that is in tandem with the national and regional peacebuilding agenda. Nevertheless, the offer given by Akinwale is not generally adopted, especially in those nations that have scarce resources or political conflicts, and thus, the issue of whether it is possible to have such strategies institutionalised in East Africa arises.

The secondary way of improving the cultural diplomacy initiatives will be through the application of cultural exchange programs and initiatives that will

encourage people-to-people diplomacy. Okonkwo (2020) argues that cultural exchange can be rather helpful because of student exchange, art exhibition, and joint cultural festival, which can help build mutual understanding and trust among various groups. The interactions enable the people of various cultural backgrounds to know the customs, beliefs, and values of other people firsthand, thus shattering the stereotypes and prejudice that can be the cause of conflict. Okonkwo points out some of the successful cultural exchange programs that have been implemented in East Africa like the East African Community (EAC) initiatives to enhance regional integration by organizing cultural festivals and cultural exhibitions. Not only has such efforts resulted in a chance to creatively work together but it has also enhanced social relationships that extend national borders that foster peace and understanding among people of the East Africa.

Nevertheless, Okonkwo also remarks on a number of problems in the continuation of such programs such as the insufficient funding, the inability of infrastructure, and the political will of certain governments contributing to the fact that the impact of such cultural exchanges cannot be felt in the long-term. Too long-term investment in these programs and wider political backing are the keys to maximisation of its potential towards sustainable peaceful relations.

Although the concept of cultural diplomacy has been defined in terms of peace building as a viable tool, there are multiple gaps in the literature on the topic of how digital technologies can be used to augment cultural diplomacy. New sources of cultural exchange and diplomacy in the digital era have been presented through social media and digital communication tools. According to Mutua (2021), an increasing number of people have become aware of the possibility of digital platforms to supplement traditional cultural diplomacy modes through enabling communities to implement cross-border cultural exchange without the limitations of physical boundaries. Mutua discusses how the social media have been utilized by the East Africans youths in expressing their culture, in art projects as well as in a discussion on matters of peace and reconciliation. This digital aspect of cultural diplomacy, though, is under-researched and particularly the ways of how this can be institutionalized and supported by

states and international communities. Research is necessary to know how digital technologies can be incorporated into the national and regional cultural diplomatic approaches and how they can help to establish sustainable, non-violent cross-border relationships.

Also, one of the most significant gaps in the literature is the absence of the focus on the role of marginalised communities, such as women, young people and indigenous communities, in cultural diplomacy. Although the literature concerning cultural diplomacy in Africa is increasingly becoming rich, a significant part of it has been devoted to state-based programs or the lives of elites in urban centers. More studies are required on how the activities of grassroots cultural diplomacy by disadvantaged communities can be empowered to maintain peace and stability. An example is that women have played a significant part in peacebuilding and conflict resolution in most African situations but their contribution in cultural diplomacy activities has terms of their contribution to cultural diplomacy would offer a great opportunity to understand how cultural diplomacy can be made more inclusive and efficient in ensuring long term peace.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Soft Power Theory

Joseph Nye developed Soft Power Theory in 1990, and Michael Doyle and John Ikenberry developed liberalism theory in the 18th century, which was utilised by this study.

The soft power focuses more on the power to make others listen to a person by attraction instead of coercion or by payment. It is based on the culture, values and policies of a nation that other countries and populations may find attractive. Soft power is very relevant in the context of the Kenya-Ethiopia border region. One of the elements of soft power is cultural diplomacy that uses similarities in cultural background, artistic expressions, educational interventions, and other non-coercive strategies to seem to understand each other and establish relationships. By encouraging cultural sharing, Kenya and Ethiopia will improve their soft power, making the relations across the border easier. An example is that joint cultural festivals, language exchange programs or even shared artistic projects may lead to positive perceptions and cement

people-to-people relations, which may alleviate tensions and encourage cooperation.

Liberalism as a general school of thought in the field of international relations has a lot of representatives, among which are Immanuel Kant, John Locke and even more recent authors such as Michael Doyle and John Ikenberry.

Liberalism is passionate about cooperation, interdependence, and the role of international institutions in ensuring peace. One of its positions is that the more the states and peoples interact and exchange, the more they can understand each other and the less may be the danger of a conflict. This is directly related to the topic of the study of cultural diplomacy and cross-border relations that are peaceful. According to liberalism, the exchange of culture can create a feeling of unity and the shared interest in other problems. The study will investigate the role of cultural diplomacy activities in creating a sense of trust and a platform of dialogue between communities in Kenya- Ethiopia border region to minimize tensions and live in harmony. The study will also focus on the contribution that the local organisations and cross-border networks can have on cultural exchange and cooperation facilitation, as it reflects the liberal focus on the significance of non-state actors in international relations.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Scope of the Study

In this study, the time scope was from 2002-2024 since the study enabled one to consider the development of cultural exchange and its influence on the peace-building processes over a considerable duration. This period covered a time of significant political and social developments in both countries, such as changes in government policy, conflict and post-conflict scenarios, and changing regional trends. The examination of this era allows the investigators to determine the trends, patterns, and important events that have influenced the development of cross-border relationships and how cultural diplomacy has contributed to the establishment of peace and collaboration.

3.2 Research Design, Study Area, Target Population

The phenomenological design was most appropriate in researching cultural diplomacy and community relations throughout the Kenya-Ethiopia border (2002-2024) since it focused on the lived experiences and subjective meanings of individuals involved in cross-cultural engagements. This strategy was congruent with the necessity to investigate the comprehension, interpretation, and practice of cultural diplomacy by communities and stakeholders in border areas. An example was the study conducted by Alhazmi and Nyland (2022), who showed that phenomenological procedures are effective in understanding the nature of cross-cultural transition by using the in-depth interview approach, which helps the researcher to identify the themes of invariance in participant experience.

The study was situated in Turkana and Moyale due to the peculiar socio-cultural processes and historical relations to Ethiopian communities. Turkana was the best suited to study how cultural diplomacy is applied in alleviating resource-based conflicts and encouraging cooperation on the shared resources, such as Lake Turkana, because of ethnic affiliation across the border.

The research population was communities that lives on both sides of the Kenyan-Ethiopian border, local leaders, elders, and representatives of community-based organisations that have cross-border activities or are engaged in resolving conflicts, government officials and representatives of corresponding ministries e.g., foreign affairs, culture, internal security at national and local levels, individuals working in cultural exchange programs, artistic collaborations, or educational initiatives across the border, and the representatives of the NGOs and international organisations working on peacebuilding and development of the border area.

3.3 Sampling Method and Sample Size

In this study, the purposive sampling technique was applied, particularly typical case sampling and criterion sampling. The sample of typical cases was used to determine people and groups that reflect the average or general experiences in the border region as far as cross-border interactions and cultural exchange are concerned. These gave some background knowledge

of the current dynamics. In addition to this, criterion sampling was used to sample the participants according to pre-set criteria that are pertinent to the research questions. Such criteria involved engaging in cultural diplomacy programs, leadership in transnational communities, experience with conflict management or peacebuilding activities, or special awareness of the historical and societal cultures of the border area.

The principle of data saturation guided the amount of data to be used as the sample of this study. Since the character of the research was to investigate various views and experiences with respect to cultural exchange and the effects of the latter on the relations across the borders, a smaller sample, but carefully chosen, was more suitable. The sample size was 130 people who were spread amongst the major stakeholder groups, local leaders, representatives of the non-governmental organisations, cultural practitioners, identified community members, and government officials. As summed up by Mason (2020), fewer participants were used, and saturation was achieved; nevertheless, the cross-cases of a study required more participants to be compared. This was considered adequate to ensure that the variation of views and experiences that the research questions can consider is captured.

3.4 Instrument of Data Collection, Piloting, Validity and Reliability

The data gathered in this study was both primary and secondary data; primary data was gathered through interview guide, questionnaire and focus group discussion, Semi-structured interviews were the main tool used in the collection of qualitative data. The approach provides a balance of structure and flexibility, allowing the researchers to examine pre-determined themes and at the same time letting the participants narrate their own experiences and form their own views (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

The research tool was piloted within Marsabit, the reason is that this is a strategic location on the border and it has a record of cross-border cooperation activities including the UNDP projects that have been established to ensure conflict prevention and peaceful cross border relation. The Marsabit region was a special place to find the way in which cultural

diplomacy may contribute to ameliorative relations as it was a diverse cultural environment with the available projects with the aim at working with communities and promoting socio-economic progress.

The validity and reliability of this study were ensured by a number of strategies. The validity, which provides that the research was measuring what it aims to measure, was dealt with by means of triangulation of sources of data, including interviews, focus groups, and analysis of documents, in which participants were asked to review the transcripts of interviews to verify accuracy and meaning. The content validity was also improved by rigorous development of the interview guide with references to the existing literature and consultation of experts.

3.5 Data Collection Procedure, Data Analysis Techniques, Ethical Considerations

The method of data collection used in this study was a mixed-method whereby the researcher relied on qualitative data by use of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The purposive method of sampling was used to select the participants to be representative of the various stakeholder groups in the community, such as the local leaders, representatives of the NGOs, the government, and cultural practitioners. Before data was collected, informed consent was given to all the participants so that they were fully aware of the purpose of the research, their rights, as well as the confidentiality of their responses.

Data analysis for this study primarily employed thematic analysis of qualitative data gathered from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Interview transcripts were meticulously reviewed and coded, identifying recurring themes and patterns related to cultural diplomacy initiatives, cross-border interactions, perceived impacts on peacebuilding, and other salient topics emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2016). A combined approach of inductive and deductive coding was utilised, allowing for the emergence of themes grounded in the data while also applying pre-determined codes derived from the research questions and theoretical framework. Coded data were synthesised to identify key narratives, relationships between themes, and

variations in perspectives across different stakeholder groups.

One of the priorities in this study was to observe ethical issues before any data collection was done, seeking ethical clearance from Kenyatta University Graduate School and NACOSTI. All the participants were provided with informed consent, with the benefit of understanding the purpose of the research, their rights, such as the right to withdraw at any time, as well as confidentiality of their responses. The research reports were anonymised, and the participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential. Since cross-border relations and cross-cultural dynamics were a sensitive topic, the researchers paid close attention to such aspects as the imbalance of power and cultural sensitivity.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Ways to Cultivate Cultural Diplomacy Activities that Will Facilitate the Sustainable Peaceful Relations in the Kenya-Ethiopia Border Area

4.1.1 Using Digital Platforms and Youth Engagement to Build Modern Peace

The results, although taking into consideration the perennial significance of conventional mechanisms, indicate a remarkable yet untapped potential in the digital world and especially among the youth demographic. This is a vulnerable group that can be easily recruited into a war, but at the same time, it is the most flexible and creative in the utilisation of the new communication technologies. These results, then, do not view digital engagement as an additional step to current endeavours; it is a strategic necessity to pursue new channels to further develop cultural diplomacy with the aim of building a more resilient and sustainable peace to be experienced by coming generations.

The study develops the idea of this strategic imperative to offer a specific, locally-relevant framework, the Cross-Border Digital Peace Hub. The realisation of the potential theme into a concrete strategy makes this finding come to fruition, and the theme is an initiative of dual platforms where one will have a physical centre in an important border town, such as Moyale, and an active online platform. The fundamental operational idea of this hub would be to proactively empower young Kenyans and Ethiopians

by giving them the means and resources to create content in the form of podcasts, short-form videos and blogs. The goal is to make youth cease being mere information consumers and sometimes even misinformed, the creators of peace stories of their own based on their common culture, their mutual futures, and the advantages of peaceful co-existence.

The final effect of such a strategy is well-depicted by the possibility of joint projects, i.e., such a web series as a youth-created series entitled *Our Border, Our Future*. The presented example is the summary of the strength of the offered solution: demonstrating positive inter-country relations and forming a common narrative, young people will be able to directly respond to divisive rhetoric and create an online community across borders. This kind of peer-to-peer cultural diplomacy is scalable and sustainable in nature and builds an ongoing flow of good content that bolsters the work of the official intergovernmental activities. To sum up, the results prove that the concept of digital integration and youth participation is not merely a creative solution but rather an evolution of the cultural diplomacy to help to make it more topical and effective in achieving long-term peace across the Kenya-Ethiopia border. Such a demand for a new approach was stressed by one of the youth leaders at Moyale:

It is good to meet under trees, as our elders do. But it is our lives on our phones. We have heard rumours on Facebook that can get a fight going in a matter of hours. We must have something to retaliate with facts and with tales of our fellowship. It would provide us with the mechanisms and a platform on which we can construct our own peace narrative, a digital hub. This is the case involving the FGD, Kenyan Youth Leader, Moyale. (FGD, Kenyan Youth Leader, Moyale).

The quote of the Moyale youth leader is an excellent example of the topicality of the research topic of “Leveraging Digital Platforms and Youth Engagement to Modern Peacebuilding.” It represents a significant generation and technological change in the conflict environment, both appreciating the worth of the old

ways of elders under trees and at the same time perceiving that it is not enough to match the contemporary threats. The comment of the young generation that our lives are our phones identifies the new phase of peace and conflict: the digital sphere. The quote wisely finds the engine of conflict acceleration of the modern era- the spread of rumours about Facebook fast, an urgency that cannot be reflected in traditional peace building structures. It is a direct appeal to change, to bring the peace-building agenda to the online platforms where the youth shape their identities, perceptions, and grievances. The digital hub proposal is thus not only a project proposal, but a strategic necessity to take back the digital narrative from those who entice hate and to be the active creators of peace.

Moreover, the primary data will give a clear-cut and practical answer to the research question of investigating the approaches to developing cultural diplomacy. The youth leader does not simply name a problem; he will create an elegant, locally-based solution that will be the modern cultural diplomacy. The action plan to counteract truth and stories of our friendship is a typical diplomatic role that is, creating narratives and establishing mutually understandable space, redefining it in the digital era. The suggested digital hub is a platform on which this grassroots, youth-based diplomacy can operate, giving them the power to become the creators and spreaders of a peace narrative. Such a strategy would boost the cultural diplomacy practice since it would be participatory, ongoing, and owned by the community itself that it is targeting. It implies that to achieve long-term peace, diplomacy should go beyond state-level agreements as well as elite interactions and supply the youths with the digital tools and platforms to actively construct and protect their own coexistence.

The main finding regarding the use of digital platforms and youth involvement as the key to contemporary peace building and cultural diplomacy in border areas is supported by secondary data based on academic research. Research shows that social media and digital communication tools can strengthen the conflict and be effective tools to create the cross-community dialogue, correct misinformation, and share the stories of cooperation (Tufekci, 2017). Studies on Africa and youth-led digital initiatives note that making youth’s

active contributors to the online peace campaigns improves social cohesion, empowers the voices of youths to the grassroots, and increases the resilience of the communities to conflict (Okello and Musila, 2020). These results are consistent with the observation of the youth leader at Moyale and it shows that digital hubs and storytelling platforms are able to supplement the traditional conflict-resolution systems, allowing a new generation to co-produce the story of peace, combat false rumors and operationalize the mechanisms of cultural diplomacy in a manner that resonated with modern communication practices.

4.1.2 Merging Formal and Informal Diplomatic Structures to be More Legitimate and Reachable

The result of the study, the article of The Integrating Formal and Informal Diplomatic Structures towards an Increased Legitimacy and Reach, demonstrates an important strategic lesson that could be applied to improve cultural diplomacy in the Kenya-Ethiopia border area. The study shows that there is a continuous disconnection between formal, state initiatives, which tend to have resources and national power, and informal, community-level systems such as councils of elders, which have deep local legitimacy and trust. This detachment often cripples the functionality of both; formal initiatives have no grassroots buy-in, and informal initiatives are difficult to get larger and larger-scale backing. Consequently, it is a hypothesis of the findings that one of the key approaches to the propagation of sustainable peaceful relations would be to bridge this gap voluntarily, establishing synergistic alliances in which the state actors will empower and enrich the traditional systems, and informal leaders will devote their legitimacy to the agendas of peace on the national level. This combined method enables the cultural diplomacy activities to have a higher reach and a stronger authenticity that creates a more robust and complete peace structure, which utilises the specific strengths of both formal and informal realms.

Findings presentation displays a serious mismatch between official and unofficial diplomatic activities along the Kenya-Ethiopia frontier, in which the governmental initiatives and conventional conflict resolution systems seem to be running on separate tracks, whereby there is a massive lack of synergy. The

main plan that can be developed based on the research about the improvement of cultural diplomacy is the institutionalisation of a Joint Border Peace and Development Committee. This proposed body is a realistic way of closing the gap which is a mechanized proposal meant to have official status through a bilateral agreement between Kenya and Ethiopia giving it official status. At the same time, its make-up was required to contain an equal number of government representatives and respected local leaders such as elders, heads of women groups, and youth representatives, which makes it well-established in the local legitimacy. It is this hybrid form that is specifically created to enhance the resources and reach of the state and the cultural power and credibility of informal structures to form a more powerful and comprehensive approach to peace.

The real use and effects of this committee could be more elaborated by showing that the committee was mandated to co-design and co-implement cultural diplomacy initiatives. To take an example, the Joint Committee would be the key middleman when the government is interested in financing the building of a new cross-border market to encourage economic interdependence. The committee supports a participatory process as opposed to a top-down decision, which could spark controversy on where to go or how to divide resources. The elders would give a contribution on a site that is culturally neutral and acceptable to all, whereas the women's organisation could give an opinion on market layout so that accessibility and safety are guaranteed. This co-creation process is not only a well-resourced and officially approved project but a culturally-approved and community-owned project since the very beginning, which will help avoid conflicts in the future and secure the contribution of the initiative to the peaceful relations in the future. One of the Kenyan county commissioners recognised the deficiencies of such a purely formal approach:

We can establish a police post and implement the law, but not trust. That is the work of the elders. The only solution to ensuring that a lasting peace is to have a strategy in which we offer resources and security, and they offer social legitimacy and

wisdom. They must be formalised as partners.

One of the Ethiopian elders said:

At times, the government itself in Addis Ababa makes decisions that fail to appreciate what is on the ground. Had we belonged to an official committee, we would have been able to give them the advice before they commit an error. We require their help, and they require our experience. This is possible through the strategy of a joint committee. (Kil, Ethiopian Elder, Moyale,).

The quote of the Ethiopian elder gives an intense description of the research theme, which is; Integrating Formal and Informal Diplomatic Structures to achieve more Legitimacy and Reach. The elder locates a major disjuncture where by the formal state apparatus (the government in Addis Ababa) is not the one that has the granular, situational knowledge of the reality on the ground. The elder does not want to take the place of the state but form a synergist relationship by offering to sit in a special committee. This kind of integration will make the decisions made by the state more legit and efficient in their locality because they are vetted by the community leaders beforehand. On the other hand, it enhances the scope and power of the informal elder system and makes the traditional wisdom of the informal elder structure more of a national policy-making element. The give and take of support and knowledge in two directions form a stronger and more valid form of governance hybrid, which can negotiate complex cross-border dynamics with greater reiteration and approval.

Moreover, this evidence is directly related to the goal of the research since it suggests a real-life, culture-based approach to improving diplomacy to promote sustainable peace. The so-called joint committee is made to sound like the most important institutional innovation that will change the possible conflict into active cooperation. Such a strategy elevates the process of cultural diplomacy by going past symbolic gestures to instill cultural representation into the core fabric of governance. It is a type of non-stop preventative diplomacy: in this case, the aim is to

provide advice to them before they go wrong, and therefore preclude the conflict before it begins. This will give a sustainable base of trust and respect between the state and its border communities in the sense that peace will not be a top-down command but a jointly constructed reality, therefore fostering truly sustainable and peaceful relationships in the region. The second finding that the combination of formal and informal diplomatic systems improves legitimacy, performance, and coverage in cultural diplomacy activities in border areas is supported by secondary data provided by scholarly research. Research has shown that working with institutions that are led by states plus the traditional authority enables the achievement of context-sensitive decision making, the gap between policy formulation and local realities (Ubink, 2008). According to African conflict management, research studies have shown that joint committees or hybrid forms of governance allow the elders and community leaders to offer culturally based advice, mediate conflict early and supplement formal diplomatic practices, hence enhancing compliance and social acceptance of interventions (Zartman, 2000). They are consistent with the observation of the Ethiopian elder that shows that organised partnership between government officials and local traditional authorities makes cultural diplomacy operational, policies become informed by the local knowledge, and sustainable, peaceful relationships along the Kenya-Ethiopia border are encouraged.

4.1.3 Integrating Cultural Engagements and Sustainable Economic Development

This part of the paper represents the findings of the research theme Synergising Cultural Initiatives with Sustainable Economic Development, and in detail, the research objective of examining the strategy of improvement of cultural diplomacy activity that would foster sustainable, peaceful relations in the Kenya-Ethiopia border region. The results indicate that the greatest success of cultural diplomacy programs in the borderlands is where they are strategically geared towards mutually beneficial economic endeavours that can directly impact the cross-border communities in a positive way. Instead of being symbolic and occasional festivals, cultural traditions like mutual festivals, traditional markets, common heritage festivals, and inter-communal interactions prove to be strategic avenues of creating trust, cooperation, and

interdependence. When these endeavours are incorporated in livelihoods like cross-border trade, tourism, artisanal production and service delivery, they create palpable reasons to coexist peacefully because communities will be finding stability in long-term economic prospects.

Also, the results show that the association of cultural diplomacy with sustainable economic development generates a self-enhancing peace process in the Kenya-Ethiopia border area. Cultural programs that enhance inclusive involvement, especially among young people, women and local merchants, enhance social unity and at the same time increase income-earning opportunities on both sides of the border. This synergy makes conflict less attractive as it makes the costs of instability economically high, as well as makes mutual interests more appealing in collaboration. The results emphasise that culturally based economic cooperation with the help of local leadership and cross-border institutional structures increases mutual recognition, lessens the historical mistrust, and promotes long-term peacebuilding. In this regard, cultural diplomacy is not a soft-power instrument but a viable development-driven approach that grounds harmonious relations on daily economic realities on both sides of the border.

The results show that cultural diplomacy has taken a new, strategic turn, out of the mode which focuses on momentary affairs and into the establishment of long-lasting, collaborative economic ventures that incorporate the concept of peace into the social fabric. The study ends by stating that peace works best when the communities share an economic interest in maintaining it, which is strongly demonstrated by the suggested Borana-Oromo Cultural Heritage Trail. This program is not just another tourism program but rather a complex peace-building infrastructure which aims at integrating the cultural identity with economic well-being. Connecting important cultural sites, community centres, and trade-dense markets across the border into one, jointly controlled route, the project propagates a shared heritage beyond an abstract notion, into a material, productive resource, producing an effective, self-reinforcing incentive to cooperate across borders and stability.

This model not only improves the culture of diplomacy directly by institutionalising cooperation, but it also

produces a vested constituency of both sides of the border in the value of peace. Adoption of one visa between the Kenyan and Ethiopian communities and a formalised revenue-sharing deal is a vital discovery since it is one of the topmost inter-governmental commitments to grassroots peace. Such a system makes sure that the economic gains would be two-sided and that the prosperity of the business cannot be guaranteed without the existence of friendly relations. To the locals, it means actual work - as guides to the sights, crafts and hospitality providers and a direct source of collective revenue. Therefore, any form of breach of peace is no longer a mere social or political concern but an immediate challenge to livelihoods, making the Borana-Oromo Cultural Heritage Trail an ideal case study on how the relationship of culture with sustainable economic growth is a very effective approach towards the establishment of the end-time peaceful coexistence. One of the local tour operators defined the potential:

Currently, tourists come to Kenya or Ethiopia, but not to the border area. However, when we commodify our common culture, the songs, the food, the history as one commodity, we have a new economy. The family of a Kenyan who relies on Ethiopian visitors to their market and vice versa has become the greatest peace-maker. It is a punitive measure that peace does pay. (KII, Tour Operator, Moyale,).

One of the leaders of a women's group emphasised the effects at a community level:

We are makers of beautiful traditional baskets. Having a heritage trail would allow us to have a non-local market for our crafts. The funds would assist us in taking our kids to school and constructing our houses. That is the sort of growth, based upon our common culture that authentic, lasting peace would appear to us. (KII, Women Group Leader, Moyale).

The personal account of the leader of the women's group will be a graphic summation of the topic of the research on the synergisation of cultural efforts with

sustainable economic development. These words offer a very lucid, strong formula: a heritage trail (the cultural venture) is what sets up a market of the traditional baskets (the cultural resource), which brings real money to such basic goods as education and housing. This is not just a business project; it is a prototype of development with culture being the initial capital. The initiative will increase the spread of their cultural heritage by building a market that is not simply local, making it a source of economic empowerment. This forms a vicious circle of the development of cultural crafts being directly dependent on the material well-being of the community to guarantee the sustainability of the initiative and the local ownership.

Moreover, this primary data would provide a powerful, grass-roots approach towards the betterment of cultural diplomacy to attain sustainable, peaceful relationships. The statement made by the leader concerning the fact that such development is what authentic, enduring peace is to us, reconstructs peace not as a lack of war, but as a level of dignity, prospects, and safety. The heritage trail, consequently, is an elaborated diplomatic instrument that breaks down the collaboration at the high level to the concrete and visible common prosperity. It is an idea that promotes peace by ensuring that it is profitable and attractive to the community members themselves. The strategy over time increases the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy by basing it on the economic realities of the border region in such a way that any

attempt to support peaceful coexistence is not an abstract political gesture but a bottom-up change that is life-altering, and results in a strong, bottom-up constituency that is supportive of peace.

The primary finding is corroborated by secondary data contained in academic research, which claims that the correlation between cultural programs and sustainable economic development enhances livelihood and peaceful coexistence in the border areas. It has been found that those economic activities that are centred on heritage, including traditional crafts, cultural tourism, and artisans' markets, offer the community concrete motivation to maintain common cultural practices, as well as encourage cross-border cooperation (Richards, 2010). The East African studies focus on the fact that in cases where cultural products and experiences are factored into the strategies that are focused on the market, they develop self-causing mechanisms of peace since economic interdependence will ensure that there will be no possibility of a conflict and a social solidarity is achieved (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009).

The results agree with the observation of the leader of the women's group, which shows that a cultural diplomacy program with cultural heritage conservation and income-generating activities can enhance the well-being of the community, reinforce social relations, and make sustainable peace workable across the Kenya-Ethiopia border.

Table 1: Projected Economic Impact of the "Borana-Oromo Cultural Heritage Trail" (NGO Feasibility Study)

Economic Indicator	Year 1 Projection	Year 3 Projection	Year 5 projection
Tourist Arrivals on the trail	5000	12000	20000
Direct employment generated	150	350	600
Community revenue sharing	\$50,000	\$150,000	\$300,000
Community enterprise	20	50	80

The predictions of the feasibility study on the project of the Borana-Oromo Cultural Heritage Trail offer strong quantitative data that forcefully confirm the theme of the research on the synergisation of culture and economic development. The enormous estimated

growth in all the indicators, including tourist arrivals and direct employment, community revenue and local businesses, proves the immense potential of this model. This information projects the abstract concept of a common economic interest into tangible and

quantifiable results; the massive rise in community revenue sharing, which is rising between \$50,000 and \$300,000 in the five years, is especially critical, as it offers a direct and increasing financial incentive to communities on either side of the border to keep things steady and in harmony. This review concludes that the table is not just an economic forecast but a strategic plan on how cultural diplomacy can be improved. The data places the Heritage Trail as one of the most effective strategies by showing that a common cultural heritage could act as a sustainable source of economic growth and therefore, peace was not only a diplomatic ambition but a reality that is profitable and hence self-sustaining to the people of the border.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The general finding of this study is that sustainable non-violent connections in the Kenya-Ethiopia borderland rely on paradigm transformation of the cultural diplomacy- symbolic, top-down actions to community-owned and real practices. The three stated strategies are not exclusive of each other and are an all-inclusive approach to peacebuilding in the present day. This is what is meant by being truly

resilient when diplomacy is applicable to the youth in their digital homes, when it is justified by the incorporation of traditional wisdom, and when it is fixed to the economic needs and desires of the population. Conclusively, the results are that peace is most sustainable when actively constructed, owned, and protected by the communities themselves, with the state as a facilitator and partner and not the sole architect. It is a multi-layered policy that builds an endless cycle of cooperation that results in cultural knowledge, social esteem, and economic success, and thus peace is not only a political agenda but an experienced, profitable, and entrenched reality.

Recommendations: Create the Cross-Border Digital Peace Hub: Kenya and Ethiopia, together with technology-oriented NGOs and local youth groups, ought to collaboratively fund and set up a Digital Peace Hub comprising a physical centre in one of the major border towns and an online presence with a dynamic digital centre. This centre should put a focus on the training of digital content creation, podcasting, and counter-misinformation campaigns, and allow the youth to create and share positive and cross-border stories.

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