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MEDIATING COMPLEX COMMUNITY CONFLICTS:

Lessons from Jos Plateau, Nigeria
and Bawku, Upper West of Ghana

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Introduction

"Dialogue ... is about shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together, a conversation with the centre, not sides. It is a way of taking the energy of differences and channeling it toward something that has never been created before. It lifts parties out of polarization and into a greater common sense, and is thereby a means for accessing the intelligence and coordinated power of groups of people...."

*The **West Africa Network for Peacebuilding's** (WANEP) role in dialogue and mediation has become increasingly recognized and acclaimed by major stakeholders and key partners in peace and security.*

WANEP's emphasis on collaborative approaches and in complementing state effort in addressing conflicts was echoed by the former Secretary to the government of Plateau state late Gynang Nyam Shom at the Jos dialogue design meeting (February 3 - 4 2011) when he stated "the WANEP dialogue and intervention strategy enhances trust and empowers conflict parties to take ownership of the process". The realization that government and nongovernmental collaboration is critical to mitigate the risks and threats of conflicts has been a driving force for WANEP's interventions at the community, national and regional levels. In this regard, the organization has led several community based dialogue and mediation efforts across the West African region.

It has also been instrumental in creating structures that further facilitate peaceful co-existence in post conflict communities including the Bawku Inter-Ethnic Peace Committee in Ghana and Plateau State Inter-Community Peace Committee in Nigeria. WANEP has at various times supported the establishment and operationalization of infrastructures for peace and served on peace committees set up by governments in the region

where it provided expert knowledge in building peace in conflict communities. These interventions underlines WANEP's principle and favor for local ownership of peacebuilding and conflict transformation processes and reiterate its philosophy to support rather than replace, encourage rather than undermine, collaborate rather than compete and above all ensure an atmosphere of inclusivity rather than exclusivity.

With proven expertise in both peacebuilding theory and practice, WANEP designs and implements specific interventions for mediating in community conflicts and utilizes its pool of capable staff and network members to provide leadership and coordination of these processes. It is worthy to note that WANEP as a matter of principle does not force intervention and peace processes on conflicting parties.

WANEP believes that parties in conflict must be desirous of peace and must take full ownership in any peace process for it to be successful. Thus, the parties in conflict have often times initiated or invited the intervention of WANEP based on the recognition of the organization's expertise, experience and professionalism. WANEP's modus operandi when invited is to work with the parties to design workable intervention strategies that can address the conflict and provide direction for durable and sustainable peace.



It is within this context that WANEP in partnership with relevant state actors and in consultation with community leaders in Jos, Plateau Nigeria and Bawku, Upper West Ghana initiated series of dialogue process that led to the transformation of the protracted complex conflicts.

The two communities have been engulfed in an orgy of violence that has caused wanton destruction of lives and properties leading to forced migration and mass dislocation of the people.

WANEP derives its legitimacy for mediating in community conflicts from the United Nations definition of peacebuilding which "involves a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and laying the foundations for sustainable peace and sustainable development."

WANEP is convinced that any meaningful intervention to community crises is only possible if a platform for multilateral dialogue is developed, engineered and sustained by the communities themselves in finding collective agreement to the cause of the conflict as well as its solution.



THE COMPLEXITIES OF JOS AND BAWKU CONFLICTS

JOS

Conflicts in Nigeria can be attributed to the pre-colonial and colonial history of the country. From the time of the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorate, historians have increasingly debated the peaceful co-existence of Nigeria, a country of nearly 200 million people divided into over 350 ethnic groups.

Jos, the capital city of Plateau State, Nigeria, once famous for its booming hospitality industry and peaceful and serene environment, has experienced a vicious cycle of violent conflicts since 1994 that has claimed the lives of thousands and destruction of livelihoods estimated at billions of Naira. Between 2010 and 2011, an estimated 1,000 inhabitants lost their lives in the orgy of violence that engulfed Jos, Plateau state. It has led to the displacement and relocation of a significant number of the population due to the multiple level of reoccurrence of the



conflict. It has also resulted to the polarization of communities into mono religious areas with Christians and Muslims living in their religious clusters otherwise defined as "Jerusalem and Mecca". Opinions are divided on the actual causes of the conflicts in the Tin city once touted as the "Home of Peace and Tourism!" An earlier research conducted by WANEP identified the struggles over economic and political control of the Tin city between the predominantly Muslim Hausa-Fulani "settlers" and the Afizere, Anaguta and Berom "indigenes" who are predominantly Christians, as a major causal factor.

The research further cited manipulation of religion and ethnicity for selfish reasons thus pitching Christians and Muslims against each other. All the claimants to ownership of Jos rely on historical perspectives to drive home their point.

The Hausa/Fulani claims that Jos belongs to them and therefore they are the real indigenes while the Anagutas share similar perspectives with the Berom and Afizere people which maintained that the Hausa/Fulani cannot claim ownership of Jos because they are settlers. From their perspective, the Hausa/Fulani immigrants came in search of opportunities for economic survival making the city of Jos to expand to its present state.

Aside from the indigene/settler claims, Christian religious leaders consider the Jos conflict as religiously motivated describing it as 'an orchestrated



jihad,' to forcefully impose Islam on the people of Plateau. Muslim leaders on their part consider the conflict as religious persecution meted against them and their faith while politicians and Government agencies deem it as political.

In 2001, 2004 and 2008, the city witnessed violent riots between the divided Muslim and Christian populations, which claimed thousands of lives and wanton destruction of properties.

In 2011, a new dimension was introduced into the crises with the detonation of a series of bombs during Christmas Eve celebrations in the suburbs killing scores of people and in May 2014, a twin bomb attack in Jos killed 118 people. In 2004, in the heat of the crises, the former governor of Plateau State, Joshua Dariye, was suspended for six months for failing to control the violence. Since then, the conflict has continued in different times, dimensions and magnitude with its actors, elements and perspectives remaining almost constant

Bawku

Formerly known as the 'Gold Coast,' Ghana was the first British colony in Africa to achieve independence under the visionary and legendary Kwame Nkrumah in 1957. Despite this feat, Ghana has been through its own cycles of political and economic instability and coup d'état regimes since Kwame Nkrumah was



overthrown in 1966, especially in the 70s and early 80s. The country bounced back to democratic rule and for over two decades conducted seven successful elections between 1992 and 2016 that have led to peaceful transition of power from one political party to the other although this feat was not bereft of violence.

Political violence is not the only source of conflict experienced in Ghana. The country has also had its fair share of communal conflicts including inter-ethnic conflicts, mostly centred on chieftaincy succession, control over land ownership and other resources.

One of the lingering communal conflicts in Ghana is the Bawku conflict. Located in the north-easternmost corner of Ghana, Bawku is a major town and market center bordered by Togo to the north east and Burkina Faso to the north and shares boundaries with Benin and Niger thus making it a location of high commercial activities and easily accessible to immigrants from other parts of Ghana and neighboring countries. Although Bawku is home to many ethnic groups including the Kusasis, Bisas, Mamprusis, Moshies and Bimobas; the Kusasis and the Mamprusis have remained the dominant ethnic groups in Bawku West and Bawku East respectively.

The history of conflict in Bawku dates back to the 1950s. However, the first major violence was recorded in 1983 during the Samanpiid Festival, which is celebrated by the Kusasis to signify bumper harvest. This was closely followed by another conflict in 1984

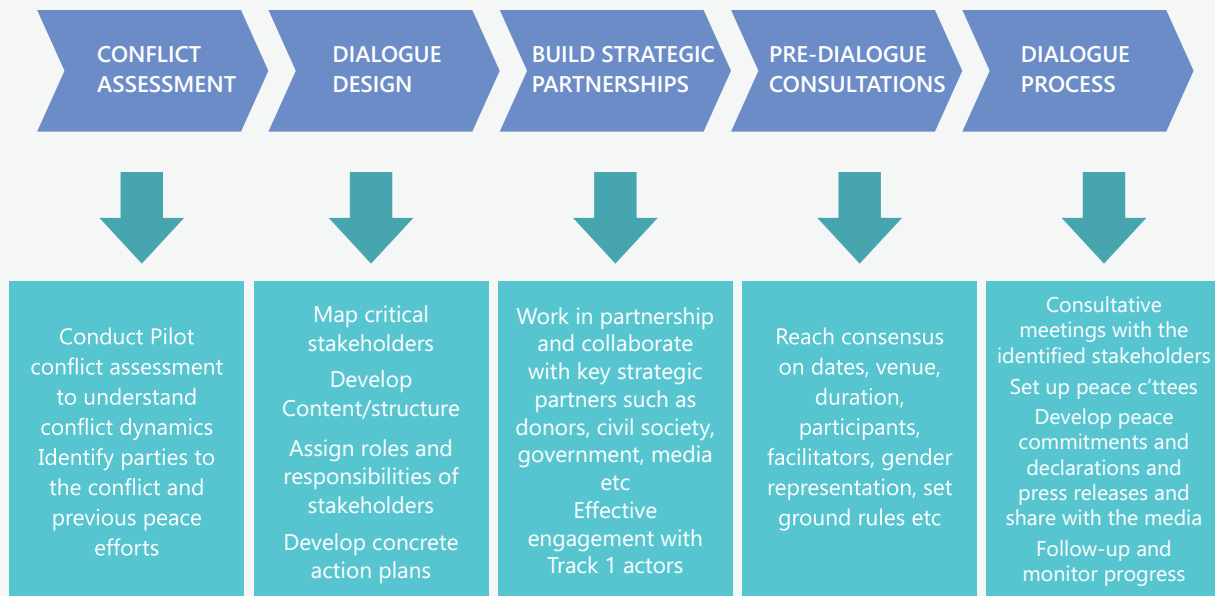


over the ownership of farmlands. Bawku enjoyed relative peace up to year 2000 when violent conflict erupted again on December 8. The cause of this conflict was related to a delay in the declaration of the 2000 election results. This conflict led to a number of casualties, loss of lives and properties and the displacement of about 2000 persons.

Another spate of violence re-occurred in 2001 with less intensity but resulted to reduced social interactions, deepening lingering suspicions, tensions and fear in the municipality. The root causes of the conflicts in Bawku has remained a subject of debate among historians and scholars. It has been generally attributed to the lingering disputes over chieftaincy succession and the struggle for control between the Kusasis and Mamprusis.

However, there is the concern that the other tribes in Bawku are not completely neutral in the conflict. Deepening polarization further exacerbated by the politicization of the chieftaincy disputes has led to eruption of violence as was witnessed in 2000. The violence is also sectarian as settlement patterns in Bawku are ethnically located. From year 2000, Bawku witnessed several conflicts and deadly skirmishes intermittently until the latter part of 2010, when the perilous situation started paving way for a peace process to take place.

WANEP Intervention Organogram



WANEP'S THEORY OF CHANGE AND INTERVENTION LOGIC

As a leading Regional Peace-building organization in West Africa, WANEP appreciates dialogue and mediation as endogenous to West African cultures and traditions. WANEP's experiences of dialogue processes have been generated from platforms convened to resolve real conflicts both in the region and the African continent as a whole.

Drawing on its proven experiences in the field of dialogue and mediation and on definitions and structures that have proved useful over the years, WANEP developed a Practitioner's Guide for Dialogue and Mediation aimed at assisting Mediators and Moderators of Dialogue as well as increasing the confidence of users of mediation as a veritable instrument for settling disputes.

The philosophy undergirding WANEP's approach to peacebuilding and conflict prevention is the realization of an ECOWAS region where its member states and citizens enjoy a secure and peaceful environment, where the people and their leaders are promoting and creating the necessary state and human security preconditions for a sustained socio-economic development and improved living standards of the populations.

WANEP's conviction and emphasis on conflict prevention and non-violent strategies to resolving conflict as an alternative to violence and force has gained wide recognition in peacebuilding circles. It was this conviction that led to WANEP's involvement in the peace processes in Bawku, Upper West Ghana and in Jos, Plateau state of Nigeria. WANEP's interventions in the conflicts in the two communities followed a carefully structured plan of activities.

Conflict and Stakeholder Analysis:

A crucial step in this process was the conduct of a comprehensive assessment of the conflict in order to have a deeper understanding of the issues at stake and the players. In this regard, WANEP carried out a pilot conflict assessment (West Africa Conflict Assessment – WACA) in 2010 which identified the historical perspectives of the conflict, the conflicting parties and previous efforts in the quest for peace. The assessment led to a deeper understanding of the conflict and the conflict profile.

In Jos, indigene-settler cleavages and competition for the control of resources were identified as the key issues fueling grievances and providing incentives for violent conflict. Similar assessments conducted in Bawku, Upper West Ghana also revealed the lingering disputes over chieftaincy succession and the rightful custodians of the area between the dominant ethnic groups; the Kusasis and Mamprusis. It was further revealed that several local and national interventions have been carried out in the quest for lasting peace in the communities.

A critical assessment of these efforts discovered that they did not yield the desired results because the interventions were haphazardly planned, uncoordinated and insensitive to the cultural nuances thereby exacerbating rather than de-escalating the situation. The knowledge of these shortcomings informed WANEP's intervention strategies.

Designing and planning an effective dialogue process:

In line with its intervention logic, WANEP developed a clear roadmap for intervention in the two communities. An effective dialogue process must consider the social, cultural, economic and religious nuances of the people.

WANEP's dialogue process was aimed at bringing the parties together to give them opportunity to explore issues, understand each other better and lay the ground work for resolving those issues by themselves. It provided the platform for the conflicting parties and key stakeholders to take ownership of the process in order to ensure its sustainability. In this regard and relying on findings from the pilot assessments, WANEP designed a structured approach to its interventions in the conflicting communities. The process was highly inclusive setting out the dialogue design, content, strategy, critical/potential stakeholders as well as the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder.

WANEP engaged in series of consultations and dialogues with major ethnic leaderships including women groups to develop reflective action plans towards addressing the crises in the two communities. Involving key actors in the conflict in designing the process was critical in terms of ensuring ownership, addressing issues of perception and gaining the commitment of the parties to the process and provided a platform for building and transforming relationships. A key outcome of these series of meetings was the common commitment and agreement to peace by all parties involved and the development of concrete action plans.

Partnership with key state institutions:

Based on its principle of collaborative approach to peacebuilding, WANEP worked with relevant partners in the design and implementation of the peace processes in the two communities. WANEP collaborated with organizations such as the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR), the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflicts (GPPAC) and the Swedish International Development (SIDA) to engage in critical dialogue processes.

Critical stakeholders also considered as agents of change capable of making the difference were part of the dialogue processes in the two communities. They included representatives of religious, traditional, youth and women groups, government representatives, civil society members and international development members. Involvement and use of influentials such as former heads of State (as was the case in Nigeria), Members of Parliaments (MPs of the Northern caucus), Assembly members in the process helped to pave way for a meaningful and productive dialogue among stakeholders.

The success of the process can be attributed to the effective engagement with Track 1 actors such as the State Government and legislatures. ECOWAS (in the case of Nigeria) and United Nations Development Program in Nigeria and Ghana also participated and contributed in the two dialogue processes.

Pre-dialogue consultations:

WANEP commenced pre-dialogue consultations in Jos and Bawku from 2010. The essence of these consultations was to identify and promote a stakeholder buy-in, determine content, venue, facilitators and other structures. The consultations provided the platform for general agreement from the outset on how the dialogue process will be conducted.

The first Jos consultations took place in 2010 facilitated by WANEP with funding from SIDA and in collaboration with IPCR. Participants at the meeting identified the contextual issues fueling the conflicts and reached a consensus on the choice of dates, venue, duration of the meetings and the representatives to take part in the meetings. WANEP facilitated similar consultative meetings on the Bawku peace process in 2010 in collaboration with UNDP-Ghana and Ibis West Africa. More consultations took place between 2011 and 2012

paving the way for the dialogue process in the two communities. The pre-dialogue consultations resulted in key decisions on the following contextual issues;

Ground Rules: WANEP negotiated ground rules with the participants at the dialogue process. The ground rules included; tolerance for one another even when parties are disagreeing, openness and honesty, listening to one another as a sign of respect and collective ownership of the process by the community members.

It also had consensus on closed sessions, interactions with the media and other actions to reduce distractions, improve trust and confidence in the process. Participants were made to understand that dialogue is a process and therefore people must be separated from the problem in order to find lasting peace.

Presentation on the principles and values of dialogue: The participants were taken through the basic principles of dialogue including listening, respecting, suspending and voicing. The presentation prepared the minds of the participants to the roles of the facilitators and the fact that ownership was in the hands of the actors. Presentation also covered the difference between dialogue and debate and emphasized goodwill for the process to succeed.

Sitting arrangement: Consideration was given to sitting arrangements in the course of the meetings as a strategy to diffuse tension. Care was taken to ensure that the community representatives were seated interspersed to facilitate interaction and dialogue across the aggrieved parties. This arrangement contributed immensely in encouraging

constructive discussions and in building trust among the parties, which led to their developing concrete action plans with specific roles for the actualization of peace. Rather than sit as groups with “sides” as perceived opponents, they sat side-by-side as voices of reason in order to generate solutions that serves the “whole”.

Gender Representation: Gender consideration was critical to the success of the peace process as women are the hardest hit in wars and conflicts. At the design meeting, WANEP negotiated that a representative of the Women's group at the minimum is part of the delegates of each of the community.

Subsequently, an exclusive forum tagged; Women's Inter-Religious Committee was established in Jos while WANEP Ghana organized separate dialogues for the women in Bawku to elicit their perspectives. Understanding the patriarchal nature of most African societies, it was necessary to provide women the platform for frank and open discussions without inhibitions.

Facilitators Skills and Knowledge of the conflict: Based on its experience and proven expertise in peacebuilding, parties to the conflict unanimously endorsed WANEP and IPCR to facilitate the Jos peace process. The Bawku peace process was also led by WANEP with the active support of UNDP Ghana and Ibis West Africa.

These dialogues processes led to concrete outcomes and recommendations. The skills of the facilitators and knowledge of the context as well as the conflict parties' trust of their impartiality provided confidence in the dialogue process.

Venue/conducive environment: One key consideration in ensuring confidence in a dialogue process is a venue that is agreeable to all parties in the conflict. This is because the wrong venue can increase anxiety, escalate rather than de-escalate the conflict. In the heat of the tensions in Jos due to the breakdown of law and order, several of the meetings were held in neutral venues like in Abuja and the Hill Station Hotel that was directly opposite the government house.

Also the Bawku dialogue meetings were severally taken outside of Bawku (in Kumasi) to avoid distractions from any aggrieved parties in the community. Timing and conducive environment is also key to the process. For instance, some consultative meetings were planned for Jos not to coincide with the election periods as violence generally increased during elections. While in Bakwu, the analysis informed WANEP to avoid the farming and election seasons as they were considered “wrong timing for concentration”.

The Dialogue Process and Ownership of outcomes:

Towards the entrenchment of sustainable peace in the two communities WANEP held several dialogue meetings with the identified stakeholders to the conflict and in collaboration with key partners. In an opening statement in one of the several dialogue meetings in Jos, Mr. Chukwuemeka Eze, WANEP Executive Director said; “No one can claim to have the solution to the problem of Plateau state more than the people of plateau, no outsider can claim to have the knowledge of the issues more than the people themselves.” These sentiments were echoed by Mr. Shaibu Abubakar, the then Board Chair of WANEP-Ghana, during one of the dialogue meetings in Bawku who said; “Peace in the world is the

peace that begins at home and so the Bawku peace must be attained by the Bawku people.” WANEP’s principle of local ownership in the resolution and transformation of conflict is to provide the platform for the conflicting parties and key stakeholders to take ownership of the process to ensure its sustainability.

The series of dialogues culminated in the institutionalization of an Inter-Ethnic Peace Committees comprised of representatives of the various communities in Jos and Bawku charged with the responsibility of driving the peace process. The committee followed up on recommendations and action points from the dialogue processes and ensured that commitments were honored. The committee also interacted with the media keeping it abreast with the progress made in ensuring enduring peace in the conflicting communities. Declarations, press releases and other peace commitments received wide coverage in the media.

LESSONS LEARNED

Creating platforms for enduring peace:

The establishment of a clear roadmap detailing the strategy and structure of the dialogue process went a long way towards the success of the dialogue process. The inter-ethnic committees were composed of representatives from the conflicting parties which helped to instill a measure of confidence in the parties who saw it as a means of ensuring that their interests are well represented. It has also been the platform for sustaining the peace in the two communities.

Building credible coalitions: Involving key actors in designing the dialogue process was critical in terms of ensuring ownership, addressing issues of perception and gaining the commitment of the parties to the process. It further provided a platform for building and transforming/sustaining relationships. Working for

peace is a holistic venture which requires the involvement of critical stakeholders. As representatives of the people, it was imperative to involve the lawmakers in order to solicit their commitment and goodwill. By their position, the lawmakers are duty bound to respond to crisis by enacting legislations that will prescribe appropriate sanctions, serve as deterrence, strengthen peace, and help to arrest the situation. Religious leaders and traditional authorities provided the needed spiritual healing to douse the trauma, hurt and anger experienced as a result of the casualties from the conflict.

Inclusivity: Designing the process together with key actors in the conflict was critical in ensuring ownership, addressing issues of perception and gaining the commitment of the parties to the process. It created a more inclusive and action oriented process with focus on information sharing and rumor management, trust building and commitment, synergy of purpose between the government and the entire citizenry.

Monitoring and Reviewing Peace Processes: A key lesson from the two-dialogue processes was the incorporation of a review meeting. The review meeting provided the opportunity to evaluate the progress made and encouraged the various actors to implement the agreed outcomes with the understanding that they would not be the clog in the wheel of the peace.

Information and Media Management Plan: Understanding the nature of the media and the tendency to derail peace processes through sensational reportage, WANEP ensured that it limited media coverage of the dialogue processes in the two communities to the opening sessions. The substantive sessions were closed to the media who only received the communique agreed upon by all the parties at the end of the sessions. This provided confidence amongst the parties to speak freely and reduced the perceptions of the public on the dynamics of the conflict.

CHALLENGES

Conflict mediation can sometimes become very complex and challenging. In the course of its intervention in Jos and Bawku, WANEP faced some challenges and constraints which sometimes threatened to derail the process. Often times, the process has either been cancelled or started afresh due to a lack of commitment from one or both parties to the conflict. Some of the key challenges encountered were as follows;

Re-occurrence of violence and breakdown of the peace process – This was a major setback to the gains achieved in the process. The dialogue process commenced in Bawku in 2001 but had to be postponed due to the eruption of violence. Several other attempts in Jos suffered a similar fate. In addition, the changing nature of the conflict and patterns of attack presented serious challenges.

Lack of commitment and political will: Several declarations of peace commitments reached during the process were often times not strictly adhered to. Besides, governments and the relevant authorities charged with implementing those commitments have often been found wanting or not mustering the political will to implement them.

Perceived exclusion: This can mar a peace process if one or both parties believed they are not adequately represented on the negotiation table. At one point during the Bawku peace process, the Mamprusis, (one of the major conflicting parties) withdrew from the talks citing irreconcilable differences while the parties to the Jos crises continued to accuse each other of “bad faith”. Much time was lost trying to bring them back to the table and to improve the trust.

Negative reportage by the media: The media can play a positive or negative role in a conflict situation.

The manner of reporting can sometimes lead to escalation of the conflict particularly when the media is not objective in its reportage. On major reason here is that the media themselves are not well trained in conflict reporting and may not understand the nature of the conflict they are reporting. This act of the media affected the initial stages of the dialogue process in Jos and Bawku.

Lack of capacity and inadequate resources for implementation: working for peace and building peace is cost intensive. Funds are required to organize every stage of a dialogue process, make logistical arrangements in order to sustain the process. Sourcing for funding can in itself be a challenge as care must be taken not to access funds from partners deemed controversial in the opinion of the conflicting parties as this can derail the process.

WANEP would have wished to continue the engagement and capacitation of peace actors in Jos and Bawku over a period of time but for lack of funding. This challenge every now and then, created setbacks in the dialogue process and did not allow WANEP to organize the experience sharing between the actors in Bawku and Jos as it planned.

Lack of trust: When conflicting parties do not have confidence in one of the interlocutors it can be challenging. For instance, in the Jos dialogue process, the parties initially had misgivings about the participation of the State. Although IPCR is considered a credible state institution for the promotion of peace in the country, the conflicting parties debated on whether to trust an organ of government when the government itself was seen as part of the problem.

However, this bias was dispelled as the parties also realized that working with such an organization will help to advance their course and give it the needed government backing. On the other hand, the members

of the parliament that participated in the Bawku dialogue were seen more from their party affiliations rather than as citizens with stakes in the process.

CONCLUSION

Mediation and dialogue is becoming a more peaceful and internationally accepted solution to achieving a lasting end to lingering conflicts. It is a dynamic, structured, interactive process where a neutral third party assists disputing parties in resolving conflict through the use of specialized communication and negotiation techniques.

WANEP derives its legitimacy for mediating in community conflicts from the United Nations definition of peacebuilding as “a process that relies heavily on the commitment and efforts by local actors/insiders to break away from conflict and create a state and society in which peace can be sustained.” It is against this background that WANEP has played significant roles in facilitating community driven interventions and ensuring local ownership of the peace processes in the communities where it works.

In order for mediation to achieve a level of success, mediators must involve other critical stakeholders from the commencement of the peace process. It is also imperative that the conflicting parties are carried along from the onset as was with WANEP's intervention in the two communal conflicts under discussion.

Despite its role in transforming conflicts, dialogue and mediation is not a fix it all approach. Conflicts have been known to re-occur after a successful mediation process and the parties refusing to go back to the negotiation table. This is a serious setback to efforts of peacebuilders in ensuring lasting and sustainable peace among warring communities. WANEP has not been spared from this scenario. Throughout the Jos and

Bawku peace processes, there have been situations where one or two of the parties have stalled the process due to lingering issues, mistrust, misconceptions or premature or hasty peace agreements.

Going by the expressed commitments of the stakeholders, the establishment of peace committees in the two communities and from the regular review meetings, one can gauge a willingness on the part of the conflicting communities to pursue lasting peace.

The review meeting provided the opportunity to evaluate the progress made and encouraged the various actors to implement the agreed outcomes. WANEP-Nigeria continues to lead the Jos peace process while WANEP-Ghana and the National Peace Council is following up on the Bawku peace process.

In this regard, there is need to explore other avenues in addition to dialogue towards bringing about longer-term conflict transformation.