

Peace for applause, business profit or social justice? Towards an innovative paradigm for transformative peace

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Abstract. This paper examines why different actors engage in peace initiatives and explores an innovative peace paradigm that accommodates diverse forms of peace activism, including those driven by social justice, equity, business interests, or public relations. The study presents preliminary findings from ongoing research on the values and principles underpinning transformative and sustainable peace in global society. The paper argues that peace initiatives remain complementary and innovative when grounded in the principles of transformative and sustainable peace. It draws on theoretical perspectives on sustainable and transformative peace, literature on motivations for peace activism, and critical reflections developed through collaboration with scholars and practitioners. The study further examines how transdisciplinary research is shaping new approaches to peace activism. Findings identify key values, principles, and practices necessary for peacebuilding in Africa, including dialogue, community engagement, mediation, perspective transformation, collective decision-making, context-sensitive dispute resolution, and selfless leadership. The paper concludes that effective peace activism requires inclusive, value-driven approaches that address diverse social realities while promoting long-term peace and social cohesion.

Keywords: peace paradigm, sustainable peace, transformative peace, peace activism, social justice, equity and unity

‘Antoninus Marcus Aurelius was an unrepentant Stoic who was not content with governing people; he wanted to be admired by them too and drew some personal benefit from the good he did for humanity. He was all his life just, hardworking and benevolent; merely out of vanity, and those virtues served only to deceive people, to which I reply “heavens above let's have many more such scoundrels!”’ – Voltaire

1 Introduction

The need for innovative and transformative models for peace in Africa inspires this paper. Popular models such as those proposed by Galtung (1976), followed by the UN system, are threatened by

developments in the early 21st Century, where nations seem to prefer military dominance in peace-making that does not achieve its objectives. Emerging paradigms by credible scholars such as De Coning (2025) and Mac Ginty (2013) seem to be stuck in a liberal view of a global security landscape that is increasingly becoming illiberal in the way worldwide disorder and chaotic nation-states deal with conflict. More often than not, scholars avoid the warning or give no prominence to the findings of African scholars that peace is not possible without social justice and the general well-being of people. An innovative way of making and sustaining peace is required: Innovative in the sense that new thinking is needed to drive a new way of activism to transform belligerence into sustainable peace.

Against this background, the presenter poses the research question: What innovative peace paradigm can accommodate all types of peace activism, whether motivated by personal interests, business profit or social justice in African societies? The article aims to share tentative findings from ongoing research on the value foundation, principles, and essential elements (also to be called crucial interactive particles) of a transformative peace paradigm. The central idea of the presentation is that peace initiatives are complementary and transformative as long as they adhere to the values, principles and elements to transform violent conflict into peaceful relationships.

The aim is achieved by presenting the research methodology and methods that underpin the research, selected literature by seminal scholars on sustainable and transformative peace, different approaches to peace activism, and explaining what is called an 'Innovative and Transformative Peace Paradigm'.

2 Methodology: The research that underpins the presentation

This article stems from ongoing research, integrating the authors' findings with contrasting and complementary perspectives from seminal work by other scholars. This body of literature facilitated active engagement in peace activism within social and academic contexts. The process of observing, analysing, and interpreting interactions in virtual spaces- referred to as 'cyber ethnography '- fostered reflexive introspection about the author's activism, beliefs, and knowledge. Additionally, critical and collaborative reflection took place through more than a decade of projects, conferences, seminars, and interactions with civil society organisations like Rotary International, involving scholars and practitioners.

2.1 The commitment to trans-disciplinarity

This kind of scholarly activity requires a commitment to Transdisciplinarity, African epistemology (African Knowledge Systems) and understanding the ontology of a progressive networking world where every person becomes a hub of knowledge discovery and processing. Therefore, in seeking new, transformational, and sustainable peace paradigms, the author employs a transdisciplinary

approach to manage the complexity of conflict and peace, encouraging an exploratory process focused on innovation and transforming ideas into solutions.

In this study, the author takes a reflexive stance, using Transdisciplinarity to approach the African peace and conflict scene and its dramatic changes from various angles. Personal involvement in the landscape over many decades has allowed exploration of hidden and dark solutions, aiming to serve the academy and humanity through both scholarly and individual efforts. With a broad overview of the landscape, the author strives to inspire higher minds within African society to engage in complex problem-solving, epistemological freedom, and the concept of omniversity, fostering imagination for new and improved futures.

2.2 Research methods

Transformational peace research methods combine autoethnography, cyberethnography, and critical reflection. Autoethnography draws on the author's nearly forty years of personal experiences documented in diaries and publications to help researchers interpret socio-political experiences of individuals and communities, as well as cultural factors related to conflict and peace. The author's work emphasises the importance of cross-cultural collaboration with diverse knowledge holders to avoid narrow viewpoints. Cyberethnography, a growing approach, enables researchers to utilise increased connectivity to explore peace in various social and cultural settings, regardless of location.

By employing qualitative data analysis, the author uncovers patterns, themes, and insights into complex human experiences, perspectives, and behaviours across different African contexts, offering deep situational understanding and guiding decision-making. Consequently, the author used a triangulation of research methods to address the research question, create new knowledge, and determine the key components of an innovative paradigm.

A priori knowledge is central to the author's presentation, asserting ownership over specific insights while primarily sharing knowledge accumulated during his collaborations with other scholars and peace practitioners. This article combines philosophical insights and theoretical postulations to create a framework that guides empirical knowledge derived from lived experiences and observations, resulting in a comprehensive body of understanding.

This paper contains literature from scholarly publications that inform and critique current peace paradigms while proposing new ways of thinking on peace. The literature is complemented by reflexive journaling (notes and material collected during attendance and presentation at conferences), of which the most important are the African International Conference, 22-26 May 2025, University of Bradford, the Russian Academy of Science Africa Institute in Moscow (2021 and 2024); the European Conference on International Relations (EISA), University of Potsdam, Germany (2023); Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa (SIGLA), University of Stellenbosch (2020); the Africa Platform, Ghent University (2019); the Bayreuth Institute for

Graduate International Graduate School for African Studies (2019); and Mekelle University in Tigray, Ethiopia (2017).

The paper also considers the author's self-reflection on his experiences in various insecure spaces across Africa, including his interactions with communities both in Africa and the African Diaspora as a researcher. Moving beyond personal reflection, he employs complementary reflexivity to interpret the knowledge gathered, aiming to understand the lived experiences and awareness of those involved in peace activism. In this context, discussions with colleagues, students, and practitioners—such as lectures at the Thabo Mbeki School for Public and International Affairs (Unisa), the Rotary Peace Centre in Makerere, Uganda (2023), the Department of International Relations at Cooperation (DIRCO) in South Africa, and participation in the International Workshop for Leadership and Stability at the Institute for Strategic Studies, Research and Analysis in Islamabad, Pakistan (2025)—have provided valuable opportunities for meaning-making and critical reflection.

2.3 The epistemological and ontological commitment

Research on transformative peace in Africa also requires an epistemic approach that recognises Africa's rich indigenous cosmologies within a global context, influenced by local traditions as well as European and Arabic cultures. This epistemological view differs from colonial-established knowledge and dominant narratives that overlook African epistemology and philosophy. In this context, the African Knowledge Systems (AKS) network provides a meaningful epistemology as an alternative to hierarchical frameworks, such as the peace and security 'architecture,' encouraging critical reflection and reassessment of their principles and practices.

AKS offers an ontology that shifts from a limited view of peace focused solely on inter-state relations and state-centric perspectives. Instead, it acknowledges social factors that influence belief systems. Additionally, AKS functions as a meaningful axiology, providing context to human values and supporting peacebuilding as a transformational process. This process aims to address societal injustices, imbalances, and dysfunctions.

The author's epistemological stance is that AKS is not isolated from a global knowledge network but is an integral part of the worldwide flow of knowledge. They consider the work of African scholars, who states that AKS is a collective evolution of the spiritual, natural, and human realms. The deep connection between nature, human action, and solidarity reflects the totality of all knowledge and practices. AKS is rooted in cosmology, scientific progress, economic views, and philosophies. To the author, AKS is a system for reflection, interpretation, and human action relevant to various life aspects, including peacebuilding, transcending formal structures and hierarchies. It offers an alternative or supplementary perspective on how human interactions can foster peace.

2.4 Upholding ethical and scientific standards

The author upholds ethical and scientific standards by carefully citing relevant literature obtained through desktop research and insights gained from online interactions, including social networks, websites, virtual communities, AI, and online learning platforms. With reflections from scholars and practitioners, the research findings presented here are credible, valid, and meaningful, fostering the development of new theories and paradigms rather than relying solely on personal knowledge.

3 Peace concepts

In this part, the author clarifies the main concepts used in this paper: Sustainable peace, transformative peace and innovative peace.

3.1 Sustainable peace

Sustainable peace is often associated with the work of Johan Galtung, who distinguishes between negative peace and positive peace. Negative peace is viewed as the absence of war and violence, and positive peace, characterised by *sustainable peace*, is built on sustainable investments in economic development, institutions and changes in societal attitudes to foster peace. Sustainable peace addresses the ‘root causes’ of violent conflict. The sustainable and positive peace paradigm is actively promoted by authors such as Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013) and is propagated by exponents such as Rotary International and the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP).

The UN system works from the assumption that if peace is to be sustained, a long-term approach is needed to address the structural causes of conflict and promote institutions that make violent conflict less likely. Since the start of the new century, scholars like Murithi (1999) acknowledge that sustainable peace-building requires social movements to tackle the root causes of conflict and to shift the attitudes of conflicting parties. However, the UN-led liberal peace initiative is based on a framework of inclusion and exclusion, which differs from African notions of peace that focus primarily on reconstructing social relationships and community ties in harmony. African approaches focus on process rather than outcome. The desired end-state of peace-building is to minimise, contain and prevent conflicts from escalating. Contrary to that, the liberal peace process has very strong tendencies to use a top-down approach; African conflict management techniques are based on a community of relationships and values to provide context for action (Zartman 2000).

In her recent book on research in Africa, Séverine Autesserre stresses the importance of ‘indigenous capacities’ for peace management and conflict resolution. Furthermore, the UN explicitly acknowledges the role of women as agents of peace. Ensuring that women participate fully, equally, safely, and meaningfully in decision-making processes across all levels—covering conflict prevention, resolution, mediation, and peace operations—is crucial for achieving sustainable peace.

My research found that despite politically correct lip service from the UN, the liberal sustainable peace model is no longer functional. Aspirations that oversimplify the causes of conflict, including enforcing liberal models of economic development, changes in structures and societal attitudes to reflect democratic behaviour, have become unattainable. The bureaucratic logic of liberal peacebuilding templates should be replaced with a new paradigm that recognises the importance of foundational elements for peace, where human relations and values matter. The connections between indigenous peace activists are of critical importance on the pathway to sustainable peace in Africa.

3.2 Transformative peace

As mentioned, the fundamental guiding principle and precondition for peace and peacebuilding in any African context is relationship-building. The focus of relationship-building is on mending broken relationships and ensuring harmony, together with measures that will transform the personal, social, economic and cultural relationships of a country or society. Communal responsibility and solidarity are pivotal elements of transformative peace. Transformational peace implies peace activism in the community dimension to facilitate restoration or evoke peaceful human relations.

The transformation of conflict (and peace) is rooted in social-psychological and spiritual aspects, which are often seen as irrelevant to international diplomacy. Yet, sustainable peace isn't established solely through negotiations between leaders. Overcoming immediate issues like hatred, distrust, prejudice, and racism, which are key conflict drivers, is essential. Peacebuilding goes beyond mere symbols like signing agreements or ending hostilities. It is a continuous, complex, and holistic process that should be integrated into society's social, cultural, political, spiritual, economic, and developmental layers. Conflict transformation involves changing or reshaping the effects of conflict so that relationships and social structures benefit and grow stronger, rather than being damaged. (Lederach 1999). Peace activism is thus part of a whole-society effort that goes beyond transactional negotiation towards transformative mediation.

Transformative change requires inclusive collaboration, cross-disciplinary efforts, and a shared vision within a specific sphere of influence. For example, transformative mediation is a highly effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding method that focuses on empowerment and acknowledgement. Techniques such as 'Forgiveness', 'transcendent', and 'heart-based' approaches enable peace mediation to be more nuanced and impactful by addressing the divine and emotional aspects of individuals, groups, and societies. (Cloe 2008). Therefore, a psychological and spiritual approach to peace may be required to transform violent situations into peace.

In transformative peace, both the spiritual and psychological interventions must evolve alongside the broader socio-political system to maintain peace. The efforts to sustain peace and achieve sustainable development goals often struggle amid escalating conflicts, which are symptoms of deeper issues such as social, political, and economic inequality, marginalisation, and exclusion. Without addressing the root causes of a conflict, lasting peace remains unattainable. An extensive range of grievances and underlying drivers calls for an 'adaptive peace-building approach' that

strengthens community resilience, challenging the UN's assumption that stabilisation and peacebuilding by external entities like the UN can simply 'build' peace, much like constructing a bridge or tunnel. Social systems should develop and sustain themselves, with external actors such as the UN or international agencies influencing but not dominating the process. For a society to achieve sustainable peace, it must build its capacity to self-organise and actively participate in a structured, collaborative process, moving away from top-down peacebuilding strategies. (De Coning 2025). For peace to be transformative, it cannot be divorced from socio-political realities that cause conflict. Therefore, peace activism frequently engages with the political and business dimensions.

In the final analysis, transformative peace is a practical tool for peace activism. To be practical and transformative, peace activism is about engaging in a complex web of relationships within a conflict context, aiming at influencing attitudes for the better without expecting to change the world. It is all about contributing to peace with what you have to offer in a specific situation.

3.3 Innovative peace

Innovative peace encompasses developing and implementing new methods, strategies, and paradigms to foster, maintain, and enhance peace within societies and global relations. Unlike traditional peacebuilding, which primarily relies on established diplomatic protocols, formal negotiations, and state-centred frameworks, innovative peacebuilding embraces creative, technological, grassroots, and interdisciplinary approaches to address the complex and changing challenges of conflict and violence. (Richmond, 2016). Therefore, innovative peace is about a kind of activism that requires creativity and challenging the dominant paradigms of sustainable peace to focus on the process, acknowledging uncertain outcomes.

The concept of innovative peace emerges from multidisciplinary research that combines fields like technology, psychology, art, education, and environmental science to develop comprehensive solutions. (Lederach 2005). Furthermore, the idea suggests grassroots initiatives, empowering local communities and non-state actors to design and lead peace processes tailored to their specific needs. (Odendaal 2013). Moreover, contemporary peace aligns with innovations in technological integration, utilising digital tools such as social media, AI, and data analytics for early warning systems, conflict mapping, and to mobilise for peace. (United Nations 2024). Innovative peace activism is therefore about integrating relevant technology, radical (from the grassroots) leadership and agency to find and apply solutions.

Innovative peacebuilding is participatory, ensuring that peace processes are inclusive, transparent, and responsive to diverse voices, particularly those of women, youth, and marginalised groups. (UN Women 2015). Current peace practice examples include Arts for Peace initiatives like The Freedom Theatre in Palestine and community murals in Northern Ireland, which use art to foster healing, understanding, and dialogue (Shank & Schirch 2008). In South Sudan, Digital Peacebuilding Platforms have initiated social media campaigns such as #DefyHateNow to mobilise communities, combat misinformation, and promote peace messaging (United Nations 2020). Innovative peace is

a dynamic, growing concept that aims to push the limits of traditional peace-making by addressing modern challenges through creative, collaborative, and dedicated efforts to social justice and inclusion.

Innovative peace is characterised by the readiness to reconsider, reimagine, and tailor peacebuilding strategies to fit each specific situation. The innovation perspectives emphasise experimentation, learning from mistakes, and utilising new social, cultural, and technological resources to develop more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable peace. Innovative, transformative, and sustainable peace are therefore not mutually exclusive but complementary in establishing a workable peace paradigm for the 21st century.

4 Social justice

The theory of social justice often refers to the work of John Rawls (1971). Rawls's theory is seen as a liberal-egalitarian approach to justice, aimed at creating a political theory that accommodates the fundamental values of liberty and equality, establishing principles that are applied in political and socio-economic studies. Rawls argues that people who hope to achieve justice that will benefit all people would have to adhere to two principles. The first principle is liberty, meaning that each person should have equal rights to cherish an extensive set of liberties, without preventing others from having similar fundamental liberties. The second principle is the distribution of resources. Rawls argues that the distribution of resources should be such that the least advantaged in society perceive the greatest benefit to address social inequalities. Rawls promoted the practice of distributive justice (the socially just allocation of resources), which emphasises the needs of disadvantaged members of society. Every person should have access to 'primary goods' irrespective of their status in society.

Sen points out the limitations of the Rawls argument and asserts that primary goods are the means required for achievement and not indicators of freedom. The way people utilise goods in spaces within their capabilities is complex, and some individuals participate in their own subjugation despite having access to primary goods. For instance, women and children may have access to education and nutrition, but their social roles constrain them from achieving the capabilities and leading the lives they desire. Many complex issues influence the choices that people make and the spaces within which such choices are made. (Sen 1997).

A group of persons must decide among themselves what is seen as just and unjust. Social justice is not about the redistribution of power, which is the socialist way of seeing social justice, but focuses on equality of opportunities and fundamental freedoms for all. Justice is more important than the efficiency of outcomes guided or enforced by a ruling class. Social justice is about stopping the 'veil of ignorance' and eliminating prejudices. Each person is blind to their station in life and to building prosperity at the loss of others. Social justice is about rights and responsibilities to others who have suffered because of the accident of life, like being born in a particular place. Social justice means levelling the playing field, with free access to jobs and positions for all. Merit can only be claimed

where there is equal opportunity, lessening 'the lottery of life' by giving a fair chance to all. Justice as fairness is a social glue that binds society together. (Butler-Bowden 2019).

Levi Strauss argues that cultures tend to differentiate themselves systematically or methodologically. Many small groups lived in isolation for extended periods, which naturally led to the development of distinct characteristics without intentional effort. These differences were primarily due to prevailing conditions over time, and such variations contributed to progress. Today, however, the increased connectivity threatens communities by making it possible to know exactly what is happening elsewhere in the world. To create something independently, cultures must now believe in their uniqueness and even superiority to prevent becoming mere consumers. (Levi-Strauss 1978).

Some people, due to historical events that forced them into subjugation, do not believe they can move from being consumers to producers who are independent of society. Nussbaum states that humanity has a collective duty to enable people to live full human lives. Essential for quality of life and social justice are dignity and living 'co-operatively' to meet human needs, including 'central goods' like adequate nutrition, education, freedom of speech, religious expression, and the protection of bodily integrity. Nussbaum questions who holds the duty to provide these essentials and answers that society as a whole bears this responsibility. Society should strive to help socially disadvantaged individuals expand their choices and live valued lives. Understanding how people become socially disadvantaged and how cultural and historical divides persist—such as in many parts of Africa—is crucial, as these divides influence different views of justice. (Nussbaum 2011).

The African philosopher Dani Nabudere argues that a genuine 'social union' can only be achieved through spiritual and moral growth, embodied in the idea of 'holistic justice'. This union involves moving away from utilitarianism, which focuses on maximising pleasure through liberal ideology, and from the capitalist focus on private property as the core of justice. According to Nabudere, liberals often claim to represent everyone, yet they allow the 'haves' to criminalise the most marginalised people in the name of justice. (Nabudere 2012).

However, 'Liberal ideology' also advocates for social justice principles. Taylor highlights how discourses on equality, distribution and redistribution, solidarity, subsidiarity, inclusion, fairness, equity, and nation-building are interconnected. All these concepts are rooted in the values of universal human rights. Although many Africans face 'intolerable cruelty and deprivation,' political reforms have not led to meaningful improvements in their living conditions. (Taylor 2013).

The complex relationships among economic, social, political, cultural, and environmental factors create conditions of continued structurally entrenched poverty and inequality. Such relationships form part of ongoing debates on social justice in Africa. In the contemporary nation-state, these factors provide a framework for social justice to be understood, assessed, and characterised as something 'just' or 'unjust.' In the South African context, social justice, especially aspects such as the distribution of income, equality, and equity, is observed and measured. Social justice is highlighted in the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenants on Human Rights, and the subsequent texts adopted by the General

Assembly of the United Nations. The equality of rights primarily implies the elimination of all forms of discrimination and respect for the fundamental freedoms and civil and political rights of all individuals.

Social justice in South Africa, for instance, encompasses fair access and the equitable distribution of opportunities, resources, privileges, and burdens. Constitutional and legal mandates provided by instruments such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the South African Constitution, and relevant legislation are essential. Ethical issues in socio-economic development, such as structural inefficiencies that hinder progress, the need to address violent extremism, and the goal of breaking the 'poverty cycle', require equal opportunities for individuals to attain a meaningful status in life, regardless of their birth circumstances or past injustices. (Madonsela 2018).

Theoretical postulations applicable to South Africa strongly indicate the importance of equitable distribution of opportunities, resources, and privileges in such a way that citizens have more opportunities and options. Criminal justice, including complementary dispute resolution, is a critical element of a just society. Furthermore, in current discourses on social justice in South Africa, there is a consensus that inequality is the result of structurally entrenched poverty that calls for an obligation to address the needs of socially disadvantaged people. Moreover, access to justice is a 'primary good' for all citizens irrespective of their status in society.

African customs offer a meaningful framework for fostering social justice. Through conflict resolution practices, they emphasise the interconnectedness between ancestors, the living, and the unborn. Additionally, a cooperative approach to using existing resources for mediation, negotiation, and dispute resolution reflects a shared cultural commitment, which generally commands respect and trust in traditional leadership structures. Even when these structures lack full trust, the emphasis on humane interconnectedness remains a valuable tradition for transforming social realities and constructing meaning. In these conflict resolution processes, participants willingly follow customary procedures without needing to escalate conflicts to Western-style courts. They also trust the outcomes of these processes because of the collective effort, available resources, and shared belief in dialogue centred on inquiry, cultural rituals, ceremonies, and norms aligned with traditional conflict resolution practices. (Cottor et. al. 2004).

In the San communities of South Africa, for instance, social justice is possible through a triangulation of values of mutual respect for the dignity of the person, applying the principles of human rights to all actions, including conflict resolution. The quest for social justice should be humane and inclusive. It should not be perceived as exclusive but as accommodating all voices in the pursuit of peace and mutual understanding. (Rammala & Benson 2023).

Peace activism for applause: Public relations and personal image

Peace activism often blends into public relations and personal image, especially at the intersection of advocacy, visibility, and hidden motives. While it is driven by noble goals like grassroots mobilisation and building a more just, harmonious world, in today's digital age, marked by constant

media coverage and brand-building, it can also become entangled with PR efforts and image management. This dual nature prompts crucial questions: When does peace activism genuinely serve the public good, and when does it become merely self-promotion or reputation management?

Public relations fundamentally is about creating and conveying messages that influence how the broader public views individuals, organisations, or movements. (Grunig & Hunt 1984). In peace activism, PR strategies can boost campaigns, rally support, and spotlight key issues like violence, injustice, and reconciliation. Groups and individuals working for peace frequently use media releases, social media, and branded messages to showcase their dedication to peace, aiming to attract allies and stand out in a crowded advocacy landscape. (Taylor 2011). However, some scholars and critics caution that this convergence might result in the commodification of peace activism, turning a sincere social cause into a means for image enhancement or profit-making. (Chouliaraki 2013). Activists, NGOs, and even political leaders might participate in peace initiatives not just out of genuine conviction but also as strategic moves to enhance their public image, attract funding, or gain political favour. (Tkalac Verčič & Verčič 2012).

Equating peace activism with effective PR often leads to prioritising social validation, applause, and external recognition over meaningful, long-term impact. (Lester & Hutchins, 2009). For example, social media platforms tend to reward visible activism such as sharing hashtags, posting images from peace rallies, or announcing collaborations with well-known organisations, often overlooking the importance of behind-the-scenes efforts. This tendency, known as ‘virtue signalling,’ can undermine the sincerity and impact of peace initiatives. (Henderson & Bowley 2010). The emergence of the “celebrity activist” is a prominent aspect of contemporary peace movements. Well-known individuals—such as artists, athletes, or business leaders—frequently use their influence to promote peace, enhancing campaigns with their credibility and engaging audiences that traditional activists might struggle to reach. (Goodman & Barnes 2011).

The overlap of peace activism, PR, and personal image demands thoughtful ethical consideration. Authenticity—an attribute highly prized in both activism and public relations—is difficult to quantify, yet it is essential for sustaining public trust and creating enduring influence. (Moloney & McGrath 2020). Mechanisms such as transparency of motives, accountability to affected communities, and sincere stakeholder involvement can differentiate true peace activism from efforts primarily driven by self-interest or image concerns. (Banks 2011).

While public relations and personal image are closely tied to modern peace activism, their impact can be twofold. Strategic communication can enhance the reach and effectiveness of peace movements, yet it also risks turning activism into superficial acting for an audience. A grand example of superficial acting currently manifests itself in the way President Donald Trump abuses the word “peace” to spin his self-interested political agenda to political constituencies in the US and elsewhere. To maintain the authenticity of peace activism, practitioners need to remain alert to the danger of prioritising image-building over genuine peace as a purpose, and instead focus on sincere engagement, reflective practice, and meaningful change.

4.1 Reflections

The challenge of public relations and personal image is that individuals and organisations prioritise social validation ('applause') and personal or political power interests over the well-being of others. The quest for external approval compromises the authenticity of good intentions. The contribution to building and maintaining peaceful relationships and a better understanding of peace is coincidental. If it is accepted that the peaceful outcomes of any peace activism for society are uncertain or assumed, even selfish, inauthentic, and superficial peace activism contributes to innovative, transformative, and sustainable peace, especially to create awareness for the quest for peace.

5 Peace for profit

Any successful business demands profit and self-interest, engages with competition, and assumes risks that necessitate self-protection, upscaling, rivalry, and profitable partnerships.

The concept and practices of 'peace for profit' involve the intersection of peacebuilding efforts, activism, and corporate interests, which frequently result in the commercialisation of peace. While businesses and public relations professionals can positively contribute to peace initiatives, their involvement is sometimes motivated by financial incentives, reputation management, or strategic advantages. (Chouliaraki 2013; Tkalac Verčič & Verčič 2012). Profit remains a strong incentive for peace activism as long as there is a market for peace initiatives.

Businesses involved in peace initiatives often adopt what is called 'philanthrocapitalism', a strategic approach where philanthropy is used to support business objectives while also advancing the public good. (Moloney & McGrath 2020). This includes supporting projects that promote 'positive peace' (the presence of justice and equity, rather than just the absence of violence) to build partnerships, secure funding, and create new market opportunities (Goodman & Barnes 2011). The focus on 'positive peace' may overshadow urgent needs for 'negative peace' (simply the absence of conflict) among populations facing immediate violence (United Nations 2020). For many people, the absence of violence for one day is everything. They cannot wait for commercial ventures to come into place.

Large multinational corporations (MNCs) occasionally initiate peacebuilding initiatives in conflict-affected areas, claiming to promote social cohesion but often aiming to stabilise markets for their own advantage. (Shank & Schirch 2008). High-profile individuals often associate their names with peace initiatives, which helps amplify the message and boost their brands. (Goodman & Barnes 2011). Academic institutions may present their work as peace studies to attract funding, donors, and prestige. (Chouliaraki 2013). Popular examples of this are politicians such as President Donald Trump, who wants to be seen as a peacemaker while selling bombs to Israel to kill civilians. MNCs involved in the DRC, such as AngloGold Ashanti and Glencore, and Rotary International Peace Centres, which depend on international funding for programs that are more PR in nature than academic.

Critics argue that commercialising peace results in the commodification of activism, turning authentic efforts into strategic branding exercises. (Chouliaraki 2013). Furthermore, businesses may sometimes undermine peacebuilding efforts by engaging in complex political manoeuvring for competitive gain or, in extreme cases, by profiting from ongoing conflicts. (Tkalac Verčič & Verčič 2012). Authenticity remains a fundamental concern. Transparent motives, accountability to communities, and genuine stakeholder engagement are crucial for differentiating authentic peacebuilding from initiatives mainly motivated by profit or reputation. (Banks 2011). The risk of peace activism for profit in due course undermines the legitimacy and sustainability of the peace process itself.

5.1 Reflections

‘Peace for profit’ introduces significant ethical challenges and risks of commodification, image-driven activism, and conflicts of interest. Public Relations (PR) campaigns as part of a broader business strategy are understandable, but hyperbolic claims of contribution to ‘peacebuilding’ and ‘conflict prevention’ that do not promote understanding, avoid community engagement to resolve conflict, while hiding agendas from the public point to false peace activism. It is mostly pushing the theme of ‘positive peace’ and ‘sustainable peace’ as a long-term venture to generate multiple projects that can be ‘beneficial to all’, including foreign donors and businesses, which is a further indicator of deceptive peace activism for profit. Ignoring the reality that the absence of war and conflict (‘negative peace’) is everything now for those who suffer from violence every day, and the perpetual inequalities and injustices embedded in social and economic systems, confirms this falsehood.

6 Peace activism for social justice

Peace activism for social justice is not simply about pacifying conflict but about actively challenging the structural causes of violence—be it poverty, discrimination, political exclusion, or economic exploitation (Sen 2009). As Chouliaraki (2013) observes, the legitimacy and sustainability of peace depend on addressing these fundamental issues, rather than merely suppressing visible symptoms.

Civil society organisations, grassroots movements, and NGOs are crucial in raising awareness, mobilising communities, and campaigning for systemic change (Goodman & Barnes 2011). Examples include the global anti-apartheid movement, Indigenous land rights campaigns, and Black Lives Matter. These activism efforts focus on human security, using soft power and nonviolent resistance to oppose injustice.

A key principle is the insistence on equality between indigenous/local and exogenous/foreign knowledge capacities, rejecting top-down, hierarchical approaches in favour of participatory, inclusive strategies (Banks, 2011). Genuine engagement with affected communities is seen as essential for the legitimacy and effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts (Shank & Schirch 2008).

6.1 Reflections

Peace activism and social justice are interconnected ideas, both centred on building societies based on fairness, dignity, and respect for everyone. Although peace activism often brings to mind anti-

war protests or diplomatic efforts to end violence, its scope is much broader and closely tied to social justice aims. Social justice activism, on the other hand, works toward fair sharing of resources, opportunities, and privileges—goals often hindered by systemic violence and structural inequalities. Together, peace activism and social justice form a vital and ambitious effort: sustainable peace requires addressing the roots of injustice and inequality. Participation in organised activism by civil society organisations, NGOS and movements to raise awareness and support for social justice and peace initiatives.

The focus of peace activism for social justice is on securing the well-being of people (human security), to create, defend and protect the community as a safe space free from abuse of vulnerable people. Such a safe space is free from securitisation and stabilisation efforts from governments that come with the outdated liberal perspective that ‘positive peace’ can only be achieved through profitable investment and self-glorification.

Suppose social justice in Africa is to be achieved. In that case, Africans insist on equality, escaping the trap of patronage of an African class that idealises the white way of life. Furthermore, African advocacy for social justice avoids an ‘ubuntocracy’ that maintains the customary ‘top-down/bottom-up’ hierarchical assumption imposed by colonialism and liberalism. In contrast, the indigenous/customary knowledge capacity of African communities for social justice and relationship building is well applied to restore the dignity of people who have been marginalised or oppressed.

7 Conclusions: Towards an Innovative and Transformative Peace Paradigm

By examining and discussing the concepts of sustainable, transformative, and innovative peace, as well as the transdisciplinary research shaping a new approach to peace activism, we identify several core values, principles, and practices for peace activism in Africa that have emerged:

7.1 The core values

At the heart of genuine peace activism in Africa are the continent's humanistic values of unity, mutual support, and respect for everyone's rights and dignity. These values extend beyond mere words about human rights, which are often contained in liberal-democratic systems, and transcend ubuntuism—an ideology sometimes used to portray Africans as being in a different sphere from the rest of the world.

7.2 The overarching principles

Principle 1: Social Justice

Social justice entails equitable access to the rule of law and fair distribution of opportunities, resources, privileges, and burdens. It is a core principle of an innovative paradigm that recognises peace cannot exist without social justice, highlighting that individuals have multiple, intersecting identities- such as race, gender, and class- that shape their experiences with power, oppression, and inequality. Rather than simply adding up different types of discrimination, it emphasises

understanding how these systems interact to produce unique forms of marginalisation. Peace activism adopts an intersectional approach to tackle the root causes of injustice, discrimination, or privilege, rather than just their visible symptoms. Maintaining social justice is essential for any comprehensive peace strategy aimed at dismantling structural inequalities related to gender, race, class, or ethnicity.

Principle 2: Interpersonal relationships

An interpersonal network of relationships is a core principle in any peace framework, including peace activism. The connections among peace activists create a resilient web of ideas and relationships that drive change- particularly in shifting mindsets, attitudes, and responses to threats. This web fosters dialogue and transformative mediation as alternatives to transactional negotiations and litigation. Additionally, genuine and honest engagement with affected communities, as equals, enhances relationships among peace activists, practitioners, and organisations, moving beyond personal gain or applause. Such a network can promote social cohesion, influence policy, and unify political efforts. Since peace-building is uncertain and uncontrollable, in African contexts, grassroots movements focused on small acts of humanity offer a practical way to shape the continent's future, rather than depending on aid and beneficiaries driven by ulterior motives.

Peace activism depends on establishing safe spaces that attract individuals dedicated to building relationships, trust, and inclusion. In these settings, three core aspects of peace are acknowledged: peace education, structural change, and peace leadership. Practically, this involves creating centres where people can gather without sponsorship, focusing on psychological healing and fostering community dialogue.

Central to transformative peace activism is investing in peace education, aiming to change mindsets, attitudes, and behaviours. This approach goes beyond traditional curricula to include conflict resolution, empathy, research, leadership, decision-making, and communication skills linked to peace activism. Consequently, peace education cultivates a new generation of peace advocates equipped to address complex social challenges.

Transforming social and political structures centres on fostering inclusive government and empowering local communities. When communities are safe and secure, they become the ideal spaces for these transformations, enabling them to act as equal partners in inclusive governance. This approach helps secure people's socio-economic well-being, known as human security, and advances social justice by leveraging local knowledge and capacities. Inclusive government structures encourage wide participation and accountability. In this process, the use of local knowledge- sometimes referred to as 'indigenous' or 'customary '-in decision-making related to peace initiatives is essential for social and political inclusion. In this context, communities and peace activists residing within them lead peace efforts, such as national dialogues or peace mediation, rather than untrustworthy politicians pursuing self-interest.

Peace leadership centres on participatory engagement and shared leadership across all contexts, especially within communities. Peace leaders can originate from any sector of society, are forward-thinking, and prioritise relationship-building. A peace activist emphasises participatory approaches,

where communities affected are actively involved as co-creators of solutions, sharing leadership roles and responsibilities. These leaders also have the skills to leverage local knowledge and capacity-building, complemented by external expertise.

Ultimately, peace activism revolves around practising transformative peace grounded in genuine, transparent, and accountable adherence to core values. Peace efforts should clearly state their objectives, funding sources, and methods to foster trust among stakeholders and emphasise the importance of local actors in peace work. All peace initiatives are valuable and innovative as long as they stay true to their foundational values, principles, and elements of sustainable peace. In an African context, whether in Africa or the African Diaspora, it centres on unity, mutual support, respect for everyone's rights and dignity, social justice, and strong relationships.

7.3 Recommendations to peace activists

Peace educators should focus on policy, planning, pedagogy, and practice to equip learners with the skills and values necessary for social justice, equality, and unity.

Peace leaders should approach conflict constructively, seeing it as an opportunity for growth and creativity. They should manage violent and harmful situations effectively, build relationships, promote unity, support personal healing and development, and influence the minds involved in conflict.

Peace advocates should work toward promoting, supporting, and developing non-violent solutions to conflict and injustice, including raising awareness and influencing policies. Successful peace advocacy is about addressing root causes such as inequality, injustice, poverty, and discrimination, ranging from interpersonal issues to international affairs.

All peace activists should contribute according to their abilities by engaging in society-wide dialogue, community conversations, and mediation. Their roles include healing, transforming perspectives, inclusive decision-making, appropriate dispute resolution, and selfless guidance of peace initiatives. Success requires a focus on education and advocacy, with active engagement as dedicated 'Peacelings' (peace activists).

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