



TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND THE AFRICAN UNION: RETHINKING CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The presence of violent conflicts across Africa continues to challenge the effectiveness of continental mechanisms for peace and conflict resolution. While the African Union (AU) has established standard structures and institutions for conflict resolution, implementation gaps and leadership failure often weaken its effectiveness. This article examines the role of transformational leadership in enhancing the AU's conflict management framework, contending that leadership style is a vital yet inadequately examined factor in the efficacy of conflict resolution in Africa. Drawing on transformational leadership theory, the research examines how vision-driven, ethically grounded, and change-oriented leadership can influence AU's conflict-resolution strategies in Africa and beyond. Employing a qualitative approach, the study integrates qualitative analysis of AU policy documents and case studies of interventions in selected conflict-prone states. Findings reveal that transformational leadership promotes greater stakeholder trust, encourages institutional accountability, and fosters inclusive dialogue. These factors improve the sustainability of peace agreements. On the other hand, transactional and authoritarian leadership styles tend to promote short-term solutions and highlight structural weaknesses. The study contributes to African governance discourse by situating transformational leadership as a normative and practical framework for rethinking conflict resolution in Africa. It recommends embedding leadership development within AU peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives, strengthening ethical accountability mechanisms, and cultivating visionary leaders capable of mobilizing joint action across African states. Finally, the research underscores that lasting peace in Africa requires not only institutional reforms but also a paradigm shift in leadership practice.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Conflict resolution, peace building, Africa.

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

Colonial domination, nationalist struggles, and the rise of Pan-Africanism shaped Africa's history and laid the groundwork for the Organisation of African Unity (OAU)

The OAU founding fathers demonstrated visionary leadership, unity of purpose, and a commitment to liberation and continental solidarity.

Pre-Independence Africa

It would be beneficial to make a frank reference to the fact that Africa's journey of leadership and purpose didn't start recently, spanning from various struggles and experiences before the 20th century to date. The following is a snapshot of pre-independence Africa:

Colonial Rule: By the early 20th century, most of Africa was under European colonial control, with only Ethiopia and Liberia remaining independent.

Nationalist Movements: The 1940s–1960s saw the rise of independence movements across the continent, inspired by global anti-colonial struggles and the weakening of European powers after World War II.

Pan-Africanism: Intellectuals and activists such as Kwame Nkrumah and George Padmore promoted Pan-African unity, linking the struggles of Africans and the diaspora.

Momentum for Unity: As independence spread (Ghana in 1957, followed by many others in 1960), leaders recognized the need for a continental body to safeguard sovereignty, accelerate decolonization, and promote integration

Leadership Traits of OAU Founding Fathers

The OAU was established on 25 May 1963 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, with 32 independent African states as founding members. Its founding fathers and leaders, such as Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Haile Selassie (Ethiopia), Julius Nyerere (Tanzania), Gamal Abdel Nasser (Egypt), and Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya), exhibited distinctive leadership qualities:

Visionary Thinking: The founding fathers foresaw Africa's future beyond colonialism, advocating for unity and collective self-reliance.

Commitment to Liberation: The union prioritized support for liberation movements in Southern Africa, ensuring solidarity against apartheid and colonial rule that have hampered the full liberation of Africa continent.

Diplomatic Skill: Leaders balanced differing visions such that Nkrumah's call for immediate political union versus Nyerere's gradualist approach through compromise, in the case of Casablanca and Monrovia, resulting in a framework that all states could embrace.

Resilience & Courage: Despite external pressures and internal divisions, they pursued a bold agenda of independence, sovereignty, and African identity through the establishment of the OAU.

Consensus Building: The founding fathers emphasised dialogue and collective decision-making, laying the groundwork for African multilateralism among other things.

Background: From Non-Interference to Non-Indifference

After building a solid foundation in African history, the study of leadership qualities and how they affect peace and development in the face of the continent's ongoing conflict. Over the past three decades, there has been a significant change in the nature of conflict in Africa, mainly from interstate wars to intricate, protracted intra-state conflicts marked by violent extremism, poor

governance, and ethnic polarization.¹ The capacity of the African Union to handle conflicts. Council on Foreign Relations, New York. Realizing that the "non-interference" doctrine of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) was inadequate to manage internal

However, African leaders spearheaded a paradigm shift at the turn of the millennium, and this led to the establishment of the African Union (AU) in 2002, which adopted a bold posture of "non-indifference" toward war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity².

Furthermore, to operationalise this mandate, the AU established the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). This institutional framework includes the Peace and Security Council (PSC), the Panel of the Wise, the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), and the African Standby Force (ASF). Theoretically, APSA provides a comprehensive road map for conflict prevention, management, and resolution, signaling a collective determination to achieve "Silencing the Guns" and foster continental stability.

Problem Statement: The Implementation and Leadership Deficit

Despite the robust institutional design of the APSA and the adoption of progressive policies like the Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development (PCRD) framework, peace in Africa remains fragile. The recurrence of violence in South Sudan, the enduring instability in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the resurgence of coups in West Africa suggest a critical gap between policy formulation and reality³.

Scholars argue that the AU's current approach often suffers from a "transactional trap." Conflict interventions constantly prioritise short-term stability through elite bargaining, power-sharing agreements, and ceasefire monitoring. These are mechanisms that manage violence but fail to transform the adversarial relationships driving it⁴. While the AU has succeeded in deploying peacekeepers and establishing normative frameworks, there is a distinct deficit in addressing the deeper structural roots of conflict. This "implementation gap" is not merely a matter of funding or logistics but it reflects a systemic reliance on state-centric, reactive leadership

¹Williams, P. D. (2011). The African Union's conflict management capabilities. New York: Council on Foreign Relations

²Murithi, T. (2008). The African Union's evolving role in peace operations: the African Union Mission in Burundi, the African Union Mission in Sudan and the African Union Mission in Somalia: essays. African Security Review, 17(1), 70-82.

³Badmus, I. (2015). The African Union's role in peacekeeping: building on lessons learned from security operations. Springer

⁴Khadiagala, G. M. (2013). Regionalism and conflict resolution: Lessons from the Kenyan crisis. In Kenya's Uncertain Democracy (pp. 171-184). Routledge.

styles that overlook the necessity of inclusive, societal transformation.

Statement

Consequently, this article argues that the effective implementation of the African Union's conflict resolution mandate needs a fundamental paradigm shift. It argues that the AU must move beyond a transactional leadership approach, based on a system of exchange, focusing on clearly defined roles, rewards for compliance, and punishments for non-compliance, toward a leadership style anchored in transformational leadership. By integrating transformational leadership, such as idealised influence and individualised consideration, the AU can better address the root causes of conflict, promote reconciliation, and foster inclusive governance, thereby bridging the gap between negative peace (the absence of war) and positive peace (social justice and stability).

Conceptual Framework: Transformational Leadership and Peace

This section establishes the theoretical underpinnings of the study, positing Transformational Leadership as an important analytical lens for understanding sustainable conflict resolution in Africa. By moving beyond traditional management theories, this framework sheds more light to the psychological and structural shifts needed for a lasting peace.

Transformational Leadership in Peacebuilding

Originating from the work of Burns (1978) and expanded by Bass (1985), Transformational Leadership is defined as a process where leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of morality and motivation. Unlike other models that focused on conflict management, Transformational Leadership is concerned with change. In the context of peacebuilding, Bass and Riggio's (2006) four components, known as the "Four I's", offer a roadmap for political transition:

Idealised Influence (Charisma): The leader is a role model, promoting ethical standards and integrity, which is essential for establishing legitimacy and earning public trust in fragile peace processes. In post-conflict societies, this translates to leaders who prioritise national interest over ethnic gain or interest.⁵

Inspirational Motivation: This involves articulating a compelling vision of the future that unifies opposing groups. For the African Union, this means moving beyond "silencing guns" to painting a vivid picture of a prosperous, integrated Africa (Agenda 2063) that supports collective action.⁶

Intellectual Stimulation: Leaders encourage their followers to challenge deeply entrenched conflict narratives and reframe problems. In conflict resolution, this is vital for breaking "conflict traps" and finding

creative solutions to long-standing disputes. It promotes open dialogue.⁷

Individualised Consideration: The leader attends to the specific needs of followers, acting as a mentor. In conflict resolution, this necessitates a focus on the marginalised victims, ensuring that the "peace dividend" addresses individual human security rather than just elite power-sharing (Antonakis, 2012).

Transformational Leadership vs. Traditional Models

The political landscape in post-colonial Africa has historically been dominated by authoritarian leadership ("Big Man" politics) and transactional leadership styles.

Transactional leadership operates based on a system of exchange, focusing on clearly defined roles, rewards for compliance, and punishments for non-compliance. (Burns, 1978). The core characteristics involve maintaining the status quo, order, and efficiency through the leaders' offer. While effective for maintaining order, this model is inherently limited to achieving negative peace, defined by Galtung (1969) as the mere absence of direct violence. Transactional peace deals often suspend the conflict without resolving the underlying causes, resulting in a fragile stability that collapses when the rewards expire.

In contrast, Transformational Leadership aims for positive peace, which involves the presence of social justice and the removal of structural violence. It seeks to transform the attitudes and relationships of the belligerents, rather than just their behaviors. Where transactional leaders manage the status quo, transformational leaders dismantle the structures that cause conflict.⁸

The Afrocentric Dimension: Transformative Leadership and Ubuntu

Notably, Transformational Leadership is not only a Western import; it also finds deep resonance with indigenous African philosophies, particularly Ubuntu. Often translated as "I am because we are," Ubuntu emphasizes interdependence, collective welfare, and restorative justice. Ubuntu can be described as the capacity in an African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, humanity, and mutuality in the interests of building and maintaining communities with justice and mutual caring.⁹ The connection between Transformational Leadership and Ubuntu is evident in their shared focus on:

Consensus-building: Traditional African governance often relies on the circle of elders to reach consensus, mirroring the inclusive dialogue promoted by Individualized Consideration.

⁷Bass, B. M. (1999). Two decades of research and development in transformational leadership. *European journal of work and organizational psychology*, 8(1), 9-32.

⁸Lederach, J. P. (1997). *Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies*. Washington, DC: USIP

⁹Ojo T.O., (2024). *UBUNTU Leadership*. Inksplode Chicago, Illinois, pp125-131

⁵Northouse, P. G. (2025). *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. Sage Publications

⁶Avolio, B. J., & Yammarino, F. J. (Eds.). (2013). *Transformational and charismatic leadership: The road ahead*. Emerald Group Publishing.

Restoration over Retribution: Just as transformational leaders seek to elevate the moral maturity of followers, Ubuntu justice mechanisms (such as the Gacaca courts in Rwanda or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa) prioritise healing the community over punishing the offender.

Nelson Mandela stands as the model of this synthesis. His refusal to pursue vengeance (an Authoritarian/Transactional impulse) and his embrace of reconciliation (a Transformational/Ubuntu impulse) demonstrated that political change in Africa is most durable when it marries visionary leadership with indigenous cultural values.

The African Union's Conflict Resolution Architecture: A Transformational Failure

While the transition from the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) to the African Union (AU) marked a rhetorical shift towards interventionism, the operational reality reveals a persistent reliance on transactional style. This section dissects the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and highlights how current practices secure short-term stability at the expense of long-term transformation.

Overview of the Architecture (APSA)

APSA was established by the 2002 Protocol, and it was designed as a comprehensive ecosystem for conflict management. Its central pillar is the **Peace and Security Council (PSC)**, which is a standing decision-making body with the authority to sanction intervention. Supporting the PSC are the **Continental Early Warning System (CEWS)** for data gathering, the **African Standby Force (ASF)** for peace support operations,

and the **Panel of the Wise** for preventive diplomacy.¹⁰Theoretically, these pillars address the full conflict cycle. However, in practice, the system is heavily turned towards *reaction* rather than *prevention*. The focus remains on "firefighting", deploying peacekeepers to separate combatants rather than the "fireproofing" required to transform the socio-political conditions that ignite conflict in the first place.¹¹

The Transactional Trap: Elite Bargaining over Structural Change

A critical analysis of AU interventions from Darfur to South Sudan reveals a pattern of what De Waal (2009) describes as the "political marketplace." In this transactional model, peace is treated as a commodity to be traded among elites. Mediation efforts often focus on power-sharing agreements (allocating positions, resources, and territory) to satisfy the immediate demands of warlords and political leaders.

¹⁰African Union (AU). (2015). Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. African Union Commission

¹¹Williams, P. D. (2011). The African Union's conflict management capabilities. New York: Council on Foreign Relations.

A Note on Diagrams

This is **Galtung's Triangle of Violence** in this section. This is a very effective visual aid for this part of the paper because it illustrates the difference between **Direct Violence** which the AU's current "transactional" style addresses, and **Structural/Cultural Violence** which the "transformational" style aims to fix.

While such agreements may silence the guns temporarily (Negative Peace), they fail to exhibit the *Inspirational Motivation* or *Intellectual Stimulation* central pillar to transformational leadership. By engaging primarily with armed actors, the AU inadvertently uses violence as a bargaining tool, marginalising civil society, women, and youth who are essential for structural transformation. (Khadiagala, 2019).

The Sovereignty Shield and the Protection of Incumbents

Despite the AU's doctrine of "non-indifference" (Article 4(h) of the Constitutive Act), the organisation struggles to overcome the "sovereignty shield." The Peace and Security Council (PSC) is composed of member states, many of which are governed by leaders cautious of setting precedents that could be used against them. This creates a "protection of incumbents", where the AU prioritises regime stability over human security.¹²

This state-centric approach directly contradicts the *individualised consideration* required by transformational leadership. Instead of addressing the grievances of marginalised populations (the root causes), the AU often acts to strengthen the state apparatus, confusing the security of the *regime* with the security of the *nation*. This undermines the AU's moral authority and its ability to act as an agent of genuine change.

Resource Dependency and the Lack of Ownership

Finally, the transformative potential of the AU is constrained by its financial dependency. With a significant portion of its program budget funded by external partners such as the EU and UN, the AU's agenda is often shaped by donor priorities rather than indigenous African needs. A transformational leader must have the autonomy to pursue a vision; the AU's reliance on external validation and funding forces it into a transactional relationship with donors, often prioritising metrics like "troops on the ground" over long-term goals like reconciliation and social cohesion.

Rethinking Conflict Resolution: Adopting Transformational Leadership

The recognised transactional deficit in the African Union's (AU) approach to conflict resolution and peacebuilding requires a shift from conflict management, which focuses on short-term stability, to conflict transformation, which focuses on addressing root causes of conflicts and transforming relationships. This involves

¹²Legler, T., & Tiekou, T. K. (2010). What difference can a path make? Regional democracy promotion regimes in the Americas and Africa. *Democratisation*, 17(3), 465-491.

embedding the principles of Transformational Leadership into the AU's operational mechanisms and institutional culture.

Transforming the Vision: From Reaction to Action

Transformational leaders inspire followers to transcend immediate concerns for a greater vision.¹³ For the AU, this means levelling its visionary framework, **Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want**, as the primary driver for conflict resolution.

Inspirational Motivation through Agenda 2063

The AU must constantly articulate **Agenda 2063's First Aspiration** "A Peaceful and Secure Africa". This goal should be a moral imperative that unifies all sectors of the African society by attaching peace building to the African dream of prosperity, the AU can use *Inspirational Motivation* to inspire political will among member states. However, prioritising Structural Conflict Prevention involves a shift that requires reallocating resources towards the **Continental Early Warning System (CEWS)** and proactively connecting early warnings of violence, conflict and human rights abuses to the peace and Security Council's decision-making. Transformational leadership demands that the AU intervene not only when fighting breaks out, but when structural violence, inequality, and institutional decay are seen, thereby reflecting a commitment to the long-term well-being of African citizens.

Individualized Consideration through Inclusivity and Empowerment

The centre of Individualized Consideration is identifying and valuing the unique contributions of all stakeholders. The AU's historical over-reliance on male, political, and military elites in mediation must be transformed to ensure peace outcomes are sustainable and legitimate (Avolio & Bass, 1991). There is a need to actualize the role of Women and Youth through the AU's progressive policies (e.g., the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, UN Resolution 1325). However, the implementation of these policies remains weak, therefore AU needs to mandate the substantial inclusion and empowerment of women and youth representatives, not just as attendees but as key decision-makers in all AU-led mediation teams, peacekeeping missions, and post-conflict reconstruction (PCRD) efforts. Their involvement will bring diverse perspectives and introduce transformative gender-sensitive solutions to governance.¹⁴ Furthermore, the AU must empower civil society organizations (CSOs) to serve as local-level agents of Intellectual Stimulation by challenging corrupt narratives and proposing indigenous solutions, thereby shifting the position of peace building from capital cities to local communities.

¹³Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2006). Transformational leadership. Psychology press

¹⁴Murithi, T. (2008). The African Union's evolving role in peace operations: the African Union Mission in Burundi, the African Union Mission in Sudan and the African Union Mission in Somalia: essays. African Security Review, 17(1), 70-82.

Idealized Influence through Ethical and Accountable Leadership

The credibility of the AU's peace mandate stands on the moral authority of its leaders and institutions. The AU must showcase Transformational Leadership by consistently enforcing its own charters, such as the **African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG)**. When leaders violate constitutional term limits, the AU must apply swift sanctions to demonstrate its unwavering commitment to democratic principles.¹⁵ This constant application of norms builds trust among citizens who must be convinced that the AU stands for justice.

Furthermore, AU and regional economic community (REC) mediators should be well-trained in negotiation strategies and in Transformational Leadership skills, focusing on inspirational communication, consensus-building, and promoting empathy among conflicting parties, thereby shifting the mediation goal from simple cessation of hostilities to comprehensive reconciliation (Barnes, 2008).

The integration of Transformational Leadership principles into the AU's operational mechanisms provides a workable pathway for transcending the limitations of the transactional status quo. By focusing on vision, inclusion, ethics and accountability, the AU can transform conflict from a recurring violence into a catalyst for African unity and sustainable peace.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Unlocking the Transformational Potential

African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) provide the necessary institutional structures, its implementation is often hampered by a state-centric bias and a focus on elite bargaining, resulting in negative peace, which is characterized by a temporary cessation of violence. This article has argued that the constant instability of peace in Africa is rooted not in the absence of institutional structures, but in a dependence on transactional leadership that manages conflict symptoms rather than transforming their underlying causes.

Adopting a Transformational Leadership style, the African Union (AU) can leverage its own visionary frameworks, particularly Agenda 2063, and align its practices with indigenous African values like Ubuntu. This shift from an exchange-based style of conditional rewards and sanctions to a style based on shared vision, ethics, accountability and inclusion is essential for achieving positive peace characterized by structural stability, justice, and total reconciliation.

¹⁵Legler, T., & Tieku, T. K. (2010). What difference can a path make? Regional democracy promotion regimes in the Americas and Africa. Democratization, 17(3), 465-491.

Recommendations for the African Union

Based on the conceptual framework and critique, the following policy recommendations are proposed to integrate Transformational Leadership into the AU's conflict resolution vision and goal:

1. **Transformational Leadership Training for AU Mediators:** The AU should institutionalize mandatory training for all special envoys, mediators, and technical experts focusing on the four components of Transformational Leadership rather than solely focusing on negotiation strategies.
2. **Prioritize Governance and Human Rights in Early Warning:** The **Continental Early Warning System (CEWS)** must be expanded to prioritise indicators of structural violence such as corruption, and governance failures as critical triggers for Peace and Security Council's action. This ensures the AU intervenes proactively at the root-cause level.
3. **Establish a Funding Mechanism:** The AU must establish the implementation of financial self-sufficiency (e.g., through the 0.2% levy on eligible imports). Higher financial autonomy reduces the AU's reliance on external donors, enabling it to pursue long-term, transformational initiatives (like grassroots reconciliation and structural reforms) that may not align with external donors' transactional priorities.
4. **Stakeholder Inclusivity:** The AU should establish a formal mandate that requires a minimum quota of women, youth, and civil society representatives to be included in all mediation delegations and post-conflict reconstruction mechanisms.