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Between Dialogue and Durability: Reconciliation Programs and Peaceful Coexistence among Post-Election Violence Survivors in Kapseret Constituency, Kenya

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Abstract

Background: Post-election violence (PEV) in Kenya has recurrently fractured inter-ethnic relations, with Kapseret constituency in Uasin Gishu County among the most severely affected areas following the 2007/2008 electoral crisis. Despite multiple reconciliation initiatives by churches, government agencies, and community-based organizations, coexistence between victims and alleged perpetrators has remained precarious, with persistent ethnic suspicion threatening renewed violence.

Objective: This study assessed whether participation in reconciliation programs by victims and alleged perpetrators of PEV fostered peaceful coexistence in Kapseret constituency between 2007 and 2017.

Methods: A qualitative phenomenological design was employed, drawing on in-depth interviews and non-participant observation with 50 purposively and snowball-sampled participants, 30 residents and 20 peacebuilding service providers, across Kapseret's five wards. Data were analysed thematically, guided by Lewin's Theory of Change.

Results: Findings revealed a tripartite reconciliation architecture: faith-based forums prioritised spiritual forgiveness over justice; government-led barazas (public meetings) projected stability but pressured premature reconciliation; and community peace committees, though chronically underfunded, achieved the deepest legitimacy through local embeddedness and cultural responsiveness. Victim participation provided visibility and cathartic healing, yet repeated testimonial demands inflicted secondary trauma. Perpetrator confession and apology created symbolic openings for relational repair, though survivors consistently questioned sincerity when behavioural change was absent. Survivors articulated a clear conceptual distinction between coexistence, tolerating proximity, and genuine reconciliation, which they linked to justice, accountability, and material redress.

Conclusion: Reconciliation programs succeeded in containing revenge cycles and enabling basic coexistence yet failed to achieve sustainable peace because they prioritised symbolic gestures over structural transformation. The study concludes that durable coexistence requires community-led, trauma-sensitive, and justice-integrated reconciliation frameworks supported by sustained institutional investment.

Keywords: post-election violence, reconciliation, peaceful coexistence, transitional justice, peacebuilding'

1.1 Introduction

Kenya's post-independence political landscape has been repeatedly convulsed by electoral violence rooted in ethnicity, historical land grievances, and structural inequality. The 2007/2008 post-election

violence (PEV) constituted the most catastrophic episode in the country's history, resulting in at least 1,133 documented deaths, the displacement of between 350,000 and 600,000 people, and the destruction of property on a massive scale (CIPEV, 2008; Africog, 2015). Uasin Gishu County recorded the highest national death toll at 230 fatalities, positioning its sub-county constituencies, including Kapseret, as epicentres of inter-ethnic rupture (Waki, 2008). The violence crystallised long-unresolved grievances between predominantly Kalenjin communities and Kikuyu, Luhya, Luo, and other ethnic minorities who had settled in the Rift Valley over preceding decades (Oucho, 2021). These structural tensions transformed disputed electoral outcomes into organised communal violence, revealing the fragility of inter-ethnic coexistence built on unaddressed historical injustice.

In the decade following the violence, multiple actors, including the Kenya Police Service, religious organisations, the local administration, humanitarian agencies, and community peace groups, implemented a range of reconciliation interventions. These included church-based forgiveness forums, government-convened public meetings (barazas), community peace committees, joint dialogues, and symbolic rituals such as tree-planting ceremonies and peace races. However, despite these efforts, political and ethnic tensions periodically re-erupted in subsequent electoral cycles, indicating that the much-desired peaceful coexistence remained elusive (Kut & Okinja, 2014; Okatch et al., 2022). Neighbours who had coexisted for decades continued to regard one another with suspicion, and inter-communal relationships, while superficially maintained, were widely perceived as fragile and conditional. These recurring tensions raise fundamental questions about the structural adequacy of existing reconciliation frameworks.

Existing scholarship on reconciliation in post-PEV Kenya has predominantly examined macro-level institutional mechanisms. Musyimi (2012) investigated the International Criminal Court's limitations in fostering reconciliation and concluded that its adversarial framework polarised ethnic identities rather than healing them. Robins (2011) documented the reparative demands of Kenyan human rights victims and revealed that survivors prioritised material restoration over truth-telling processes. Lynch (2018) critiqued Kenya's reconciliation performances as politically orchestrated rather than survivor centred. While invaluable, these studies converge on national and institutional frames of analysis and leave largely unexamined the micro-level, lived experience of participation in local reconciliation programs. For instance, they investigate specifically whether and how participation fostered coexistence at the constituency level where violence was most acutely experienced.

This gap is consequential for both theory and practice. Sustainable peacebuilding, as Zupančič and Pejič (2018) argue, is fundamentally a local process that must be owned at the community level before it can be translated into effective national policy. Without understanding how survivors in high-intensity PEV zones experienced and evaluated reconciliation programs, policymakers lack the granular evidence necessary to design interventions that move beyond symbolic appeasement toward genuine coexistence. This study addresses that gap by examining, through the phenomenological accounts of victims, alleged perpetrators, and service providers in Kapseret constituency, whether participation in reconciliation programs fostered peaceful coexistence between 2007 and 2017. The study's constituency-level focus generates survivor-centred empirical evidence that complements and challenges existing theoretical and macro-institutional accounts.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Theoretical Framework: *Lewin's Theory of Change*

This study is anchored in Kurt Lewin's (1947) three-stage Theory of Change, unfreezing, movement, and refreezing, which provides a powerful framework for analysing the dynamics of social transformation in post-conflict settings. Lewin conceptualised human behaviour as stabilised by a quasi-stationary equilibrium of competing driving and restraining forces; for peace to be achieved, the restraining forces maintaining inter-ethnic hostility, unresolved grievances, impunity, material insecurity, must first be destabilised through the unfreezing stage (Burnes, 2020). Communities must then be moved through deliberate interventions toward new relational configurations during the movement stage, before those configurations are consolidated through institutions, norms, and sustained support during the refreezing stage. Applied to reconciliation in post-PEV Kapsaret, unfreezing corresponds to breaking cycles of revenge and fear through dialogue, apology, and symbolic recognition, while the movement stage encompasses active reconciliation programming, forums, joint activities, and community-based mediation, that shifts relational dynamics between former adversaries. The refreezing stage, critically, requires structural changes: justice mechanisms, material reparations, economic empowerment, and institutional legitimacy that anchor new peaceful relations against the pull of residual grievances.

Critics have noted that Lewin's model is analytically neat but understates the complexity of real-world transformation (Bartunek & Woodman, 2015). In deeply polarized multi-ethnic settings, freezing and unfreezing occur non-linearly; forces of resistance interact unpredictably with new driving forces, and symbolic gestures may initiate movement without the structural support necessary for consolidation. Despite these limitations, the model's force-field concept retains substantial explanatory power for examining why well-intentioned reconciliation programs produce fragile rather than durable outcomes. This study applies the framework not as a prescriptive template but as a diagnostic lens, using its three stages to identify precisely where Kapsaret's reconciliation programs succeeded, stalled, and failed. As this study reveals, most interventions achieved partial unfreezing but failed to complete the refreezing process, leaving communities in a precarious, conditional coexistence susceptible to relapse under electoral or economic stress.

1.2.2 Empirical Review

Reconciliation in Post-Conflict Contexts: International and African Evidence

The theoretical literature on reconciliation converges on a fundamental distinction between procedural and substantive dimensions of peace. Hayner (2010) classifies reconciliation as operating at both individual and national levels and notes that sustainable societal peace requires the latter to be built on genuine individual willingness to coexist, not on politically mandated declarations of harmony. Carney (2015) extends this argument in his analysis of Catholic-led reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda and demonstrates that faith-based frameworks emphasising spiritual forgiveness can effectively reduce hostility but risk obscuring demands for accountability, thereby reinforcing a culture of impunity. These twin concerns, the insufficiency of political performance and the accountability cost of spiritual framing, recur across comparative post-conflict contexts and directly anticipate the findings of the present study. Together, they establish the analytical tension between symbolic and structural reconciliation that organizes this study's discussion.

Nigeria's post-civil war experience illustrates the structural limitations of reconciliation programs that neglect economic dimensions. Osai et al. (2019) found that the 3Rs framework, reconciliation, rehabilitation, and reconstruction, failed to achieve durable peace because structural poverty was not addressed, trapping former enemies in resource competition rather than enabling genuine relational repair. This lesson is analytically consistent across contexts: reconciliation that is not embedded within broader socio-economic transformation risks producing negative peace, the mere absence of active violence, rather than positive peace characterised by trust, justice, and shared futures (Galtung, 2016). The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) similarly demonstrates both the power and limits of institutionalised reconciliation: Du Toit (2017) concludes that while the TRC created vital space for truth-telling and acknowledgment, its emphasis on internal transformation underestimated the extent to which structural inequality continued to generate racial tension two decades later. Metz (2016), writing from an Ubuntu-based African ethical perspective, argues that symbolic gestures of communal solidarity can suffice for reconciliation within African cultural contexts, but acknowledges that this argument falters when material grievances remain unaddressed.

Reconciliation in Kenya's Post-PEV Context

At the peak of Kenya's 2007/2008 violence, mediators led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan brokered the National Accord, establishing a power-sharing arrangement and creating the Commission of Inquiry into Post-Election Violence (CIPEV) and the Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC) (Aloyo et al., 2023). Robins (2011) found that Kenyan victims broadly welcomed truth commissions as preferable to adversarial legal proceedings, valuing the opportunity to narrate their suffering without subjecting themselves to cross-examination by counsel defending those who had harmed them. However, the TJRC's ultimate failure to secure prosecutions or deliver reparations deepened survivor disillusionment with institutional justice, exposing a structural gap between the promise and practice of transitional accountability. This disillusionment was further compounded by the International Criminal Court's involvement in Kenyan PEV cases, which Musyimi (2012) documents as having heightened rather than resolved ethnic tensions, as suspects were perceived through ethnic lenses and court proceedings became proxies for political battles. The convergence of these institutional failures produced what Kagwanja and Southall (2013) characterise as a fragile post-conflict settlement, in which ethnically partitioned political economies continued to generate the conditions for electoral violence.

Church leaders consistently argued that healing and reconciliation were more urgent than prosecution, yet Musyimi's (2012) evidence suggests that this prioritisation of spiritual over legal accountability left structural grievances unresolved and created conditions for their periodic re-emergence. Oucho (2021) identifies the specific drivers of violence in the Rift Valley, ethnicity, historical land disputes, and perceptions of marginalisation, as requiring targeted address within any viable reconciliation framework. Lusambili et al. (2016) document the Catholic Church's constructive peacebuilding role in Kakamega County following 2007/2008, noting that faith-based safe spaces enabled difficult inter-ethnic conversations that secular platforms could not always accommodate. Together, these studies establish an important evidence base but leave a persistent analytical gap: none systematically examines, through survivor phenomenology, whether participation in multi-actor reconciliation programs at the constituency level succeeded in fostering coexistence in identified PEV hotspots such as Kapseret. This study addresses that gap, contributing survivor-centred, qualitative evidence from one of Kenya's most violence-affected constituencies.

1.3 Methodology

Research Design: This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design, which centres on understanding the lived experience of individuals who have directly encountered a phenomenon of interest (Ejimabo, 2015; Busetto et al., 2020). Phenomenology is methodologically appropriate for this inquiry because the research sought to understand how survivors of PEV experienced and evaluated reconciliation programs, a deeply subjective and context-specific process in which meaning-making, emotional response, and interpretive perspective are analytically central. Unlike quantitative approaches that aggregate and measure behaviours numerically, phenomenology reveals the meaning-making processes through which participants interpret their social realities and generate intersubjective understanding (Creswell, 2014). The design enabled the researcher to foreground survivor voice and to capture the nuanced distinctions that participants themselves drew between coexistence and genuine reconciliation, distinctions that standardised survey instruments would not have detected. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation, and analysis proceeded thematically through iterative coding guided by Lewin's (1947) Theory of Change.

Study Location and Population: The study was conducted in Kapseret constituency, Uasin Gishu County, Kenya, a constituency of 198,499 residents across five wards (Kapsereet, Langas, Ngeria, Megun, and Kipkenyo) that experienced severe PEV in 2007/2008 and is classified as a conflict hotspot by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (Okatch et al., 2022). The study covered the period 2007 to 2017, encompassing two electoral cycles following the peak violence and targeting residents who were at least ten years of age by 2017 and thus able to provide informed phenomenological accounts of reconciliation experiences. Two broad participant categories were identified: community residents, comprising victims, alleged perpetrators, and witnesses from diverse ethnic backgrounds including Kalenjin, Kikuyu, Luhya, and Luo, and peacebuilding service providers drawn from five institutional categories: the Kenya Police Service, religious organisations, the local administration, community peace groups, and humanitarian organisations. Kapseret was selected as the study site not only because of the severity of its PEV experience but because it hosted a diversity of reconciliation interventions implemented by multiple actors over the study period, making it an analytically rich site for examining program variation. The constituency's multi-ethnic composition and documented persistence of inter-ethnic tension made it an integral basis for investigating the conditions under which reconciliation programs do or do not produce durable coexistence.

Sampling Procedure and Sample Size: A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was employed to ensure diversity of ethnic background, gender, age, and institutional affiliation across the study sample. Service providers were purposively sampled from county-headquartered organisations through consultation with management, who identified officers with direct PEV peacebuilding experience in Kapseret. Ward Members of County Assembly assisted in identifying community residents, who then facilitated snowball recruitment of additional participants with relevant direct knowledge of reconciliation programs. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached, the point at which additional interviews generated no new themes (Morse, 2015; Hennink et al., 2017). The final sample comprised 50 participants: 30 residents (six per ward, gender-balanced) and 20 service providers (four per institutional category, gender-balanced), as detailed in Table 1. This sample composition ensured that findings could be triangulated across provider and community perspectives and across gender and ethnic lines, strengthening the interpretive validity of thematic analysis.

Table 1: Sample Frame

Category	Unit	Female	Male	Total
Residents	Five wards (6 per ward)	15	15	30
Service Providers	Five categories (4 per category)	10	10	20
Total		25	25	50

Source: Field Data (2025).

Data Collection Instruments: Two instruments were employed to collect primary data. First, semi-structured interview guides with open-ended questions were developed separately for service providers and residents: service provider guides investigated program design, coordination mechanisms, challenges, and perceived outcomes, while resident guides explored personal participation, emotional responses, perceptions of program effectiveness, and assessment of coexistence outcomes. Swahili-language versions were provided for participants not conversant in English, ensuring linguistic accessibility across the ethnically diverse sample. Second, non-participant observation forms were used to record behavioural and emotional indicators during interviews, including expressions of fear, anger, optimism, or distress, providing a complementary layer of data that triangulated interview accounts with directly observed affect and behaviour. Ethical approval was obtained from the University's Postgraduate Office and the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI). Informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection, and trauma-sensitive protocols, including access to psychosocial support, were in place to support participants who experienced emotional distress during testimony.

Data Analysis: Data were analysed thematically through iterative coding and categorisation guided by the research objective and Lewin's (1947) Theory of Change. The researcher systematically reviewed transcripts, identified recurring patterns in participants' accounts, and developed themes that reflected the lived experience of reconciliation program participation and its perceived impact on coexistence. Findings were triangulated across service provider and resident data, and between interview and observation records, to strengthen interpretive validity and identify convergences and divergences in how different participant categories understood reconciliation outcomes. Member checking was conducted by sharing summarised findings with five participants from each category to confirm interpretive accuracy and guard against researcher-imposed constructions (Candela, 2019). All data are presented with participant reference codes, such as RT024, to preserve anonymity while enabling traceability across findings. The thematic analysis generated five principal themes, reported in the results and discussion section below.

1.4 Results and Discussion

Coordination of Reconciliation Programs: A Fragmented Architecture

Findings revealed that reconciliation programs in Kapseret operated through three principal actors, churches, government, and community peace committees, each with distinct logics, capacities, and limitations whose interaction produced a fragmented rather than complementary peacebuilding architecture. Churches created faith-based safe spaces where victims and perpetrators engaged in dialogue grounded in scriptural teachings on forgiveness, and their moral authority and institutional neutrality enabled difficult conversations that secular platforms could not always accommodate. However, faith-based reconciliation systematically subordinated justice concerns to spiritual imperatives: one participant reflected, "We were told to forgive so that God could heal the land, but no

one asked about our losses" (RT034). Survivors experienced forgiveness not as liberation but as silencing, a religious framing that recast unresolved material and legal grievances as spiritual obstacles to healing rather than legitimate claims requiring institutional response. This finding aligns with Carney's (2015) analysis of Catholic reconciliation in Rwanda, where spiritual frameworks prioritised harmony over accountability, but extends it by documenting how survivors themselves interpreted this subordination as institutionally dismissive of their suffering.

Government-convened barazas projected state commitment to stability and provided security infrastructure that reduced immediate fear of renewed violence, yet survivor testimony consistently revealed that these forums pressured premature reconciliation. One widowed participant stated: "They started talking about reconciliation just weeks after the violence. My wounds were still fresh, my husband's body had just been buried. How could they expect me to forgive so quickly?" (RT0031). Rather than facilitating genuine healing, barazas frequently functioned as political performances in which leaders delivered speeches while survivors remained passive audiences: "They came with long speeches, but no time to hear us" (RT028). These findings corroborate Lynch's (2018) critique of state-led reconciliation as politically orchestrated and extend Lewin's (1947) framework to reveal that barazas attempted to force movement, social transition toward forgiveness, without adequate unfreezing through acknowledgment, thereby generating resistance rather than change. The sequencing problem was structural: political imperatives demanded visible reconciliation on administrative timelines irrespective of survivor readiness.

Community peace committees (CPCs), composed of local residents from multiple ethnic groups, achieved the deepest legitimacy of all three actor types. Their embeddedness in community life gave them unique authority: "They were our neighbours; they knew our pain" (RT045). CPCs organised inter-ethnic sports tournaments, joint farming activities, and grassroots dialogue sessions, and responded quickly to emerging disputes before escalation: "When fights started, they came fast. They did not wait for government orders. That quick action saved us from bigger conflict" (RT007). Through Lewin's (1947) framework, CPCs represented the most complete implementation of the model, unfreezing inter-ethnic hostility through trusted relationships, enabling movement through cultural understanding and practical cooperation, and beginning the refreezing process through sustained community engagement. However, chronic underfunding severely constrained their effectiveness: "They worked from goodwill, but goodwill cannot last forever. Without support, peace will fade" (RT014). This structural fragility, grassroots legitimacy without institutional resourcing, constitutes a critical vulnerability in Kapseret's reconciliation architecture and identifies CPCs as the intervention type most urgently requiring systemic investment.

The absence of inter-agency coordination generated reconciliation fatigue that compounded the limitations of each individual actor. Multiple organisations approached the same survivors simultaneously and demanded repeated testimonials through divergent methodologies and timelines: "Different organisations were conducting reconciliation using different approaches and timelines. Sometimes victims were being asked to reconcile before they felt ready" (RT0019). Competing narratives confused participants about reconciliation's purpose, while duplicated demands retraumatised survivors through repeated exposure to painful memory. This coordination failure prevented the complementarity between faith-led healing, government security provision, humanitarian trauma care, and community-based mediation that effective multi-actor reconciliation requires. The fragmented

architecture ultimately produced a system whose aggregate effect was less than the sum of its parts, generating contradictory signals, overlapping burdens, and uncoordinated timelines that undermined each component's potential contribution to durable peace.

Victim Participation: Visibility, Catharsis, and the Risks of Re-Traumatisation

Victim participation in reconciliation forums served multiple psychological and social functions, providing visibility, validation, and cathartic healing, though these benefits were accompanied by significant risks when programs lacked trauma-sensitive design. Participation provided public acknowledgment of suffering that had previously been invisible or minimised in dominant narratives: "When we told our stories, we felt human again. People could see our pain, not just numbers" (RT048). This recognition function was particularly significant for marginalised victims, women, the poor, and ethnic minorities, whose experiences were often absent from official accounts of the violence. By democratising suffering recognition across social boundaries, forums restored agency to participants previously rendered powerless by violence and by the silence that followed it. The collective dimension of testimony generated catharsis that individual counselling could not replicate: "We carried so much pain inside, but when we spoke together, it was lighter" (RT052). One participant in a women's focus group articulated this shift from individual pain to collective healing with particular clarity: "We sat and cried together, not as enemies but as mothers who had lost children, homes, and peace. In that moment, we realised healing was not about who suffered more but about how we could continue living together despite the past" (RT055).

Repeated storytelling across multiple agencies, however, inflicted significant secondary trauma that transformed reconciliation forums from sites of healing into sources of additional harm. Participants described being required to narrate their suffering in successive sessions organised by different organisations: "Every time I spoke, it was like reopening a wound. Healing was delayed" (RT019). The accumulation of testimonial demands progressively depleted survivors' capacity to engage: "We were called again and again to share the same pain. At first, it felt good, but later, it drained us. The reconciliation became another kind of suffering" (RT037). The absence of post-session psychosocial support compounded this harm, leaving survivors to manage the emotional consequences of testimony without professional assistance: "They gathered us to speak but left us alone afterward. We carried the pain back home, heavier than before" (RT028). These findings raise serious concerns about reconciliation program design that prioritises institutional documentation over survivor well-being, and are consistent with Buckley et al.'s (2013) cautionary observation that acknowledgment processes can perpetuate rather than resolve harm when not accompanied by therapeutic support. They challenge optimistic assumptions in United Nations (2018) frameworks suggesting that participation alone ensures positive outcomes.

Perpetrator Participation: The Accountability-Sincerity Nexus

Perpetrator engagement through confession and apology was identified as a critical, though deeply ambivalent, dimension of reconciliation in Kapseret. Confessions created possibilities for truth and relational repair by validating victims' experiences and constituting the foundational step of open recognition that Yehudith (2009) identifies in the reconciliation pyramid. Survivors described the transformative potential of public acknowledgment: "They came forward and told us, yes, we burned houses, yes, we chased people away. Hearing this was painful, but it showed us that they were willing to face the truth. It gave us a place to start healing from honesty" (RT013). Public apologies similarly

reduced hostility in daily interactions, creating what survivors described as symbolic bridges that enabled minimal civility: "We still felt the pain but hearing them apologise in front of everyone made it easier to share markets, to greet each other, and to live side by side. Without apology, we would remain enemies forever" (RT026). This aligns with Du Toit's (2017) finding that apologies function less as mechanisms for erasing memory than for renegotiating coexistence, reshaping the affective conditions under which former adversaries navigate shared social space.

Survivors, however, consistently questioned the sincerity of apologies unaccompanied by behavioural change, and their scepticism constitutes a theoretically significant contribution to understanding the accountability-sincerity nexus in transitional justice. When perpetrators continued harmful or indifferent conduct after public expressions of remorse, survivors interpreted apologies as performances rather than genuine commitments: "They came to the forums, stood up, and said all the right words. But later, we saw nothing change, no effort to rebuild what was destroyed, no kindness, no proof of remorse. This made their apologies feel like lies" (RT021). This finding demands a critical theoretical refinement of Yehudith's (2009) model: survivors link sincerity not to the verbal act of apology but to its sustained demonstration through observable behavioural change over time. Without this demonstration, apologies not only failed to build trust but actively reinforced suspicion, widening relational divides rather than bridging them. Reconciliation, in this understanding, constitutes ongoing practice rather than a discrete performative event, and programs that conflate the two-risk generating cynicism rather than coexistence.

Joint Community Dialogues: The Primacy of Local Ownership

Joint dialogues brought victims and perpetrators into structured, non-violent spaces for direct confrontation of shared history and provided rare opportunities for face-to-face truth-telling where acknowledgment could emerge from direct encounter rather than institutional mediation. Participants described these encounters as simultaneously painful and generative: "We sat under the same tree, the ones who lost and the ones who caused the loss. It was heavy, but when we spoke together, we began to understand each other. It was not forgiveness, but it was a start" (RT097). A critical determinant of dialogue effectiveness was leadership origin: when forums were led by local elders or community figures, participants reported significantly higher levels of trust and empathic engagement. "Because our elders led it, we trusted the process" (RT015); "When our neighbours organised the dialogue, we spoke freely. We realised that even those who wronged us carried their own fears. It helped us see each other as human again" (RT038). This finding strongly corroborates Zupančič and Pejič's (2018) argument that sustainable peacebuilding must be locally owned and community-led, not merely community-attended.

Conversely, dialogues organised by external agencies or under political time pressure were perceived as coercive and performative, and their failure to generate trust reveals how process legitimacy is constituted rather than inherent. Survivors who experienced externally imposed dialogues rejected them emphatically: "The outsiders came, organised meetings quickly, told us to talk and forgive, and then left. But the anger remained. These dialogues were not for us, they were for their reports" (RT004). The contrast between locally legitimate and externally imposed dialogues reveals a crucial design principle: the social relationships and power dynamics that organise dialogue fundamentally determine whether it produces authentic exchange or performative compliance. Rushed, externally scripted dialogues risk reinforcing mistrust by making reconciliation feel manipulative rather than meaningful, and by signalling that survivors' timelines and emotional readiness are subordinate to institutional reporting imperatives. These findings carry direct implications for peacebuilding program design: external agencies seeking to

facilitate community dialogue must prioritise the conditions for local ownership over the speed of visible outputs.

Symbolic Acts of Reconciliation: Memory, Renewal, and Structural Limits

Symbolic rituals, tree planting, peace races, shared meals, and collective prayers, were embraced by participants as visible representations of renewal and new beginnings whose communal dimension carried genuine reconciliatory power in Kapseret's cultural context. Participants frequently cited these acts as tangible, lasting anchors of collective memory: "Planting trees meant new life after destruction" (RT017); "The trees we planted are still there; they remind us every day" (RT048). Accounts of church-organised shared meals captured the transformative potential of embodied communal practice: "The church brought us together for prayer, and afterward, we sat and shared food. For a moment, we forgot the divisions. Eating with those who had harmed us was not easy, but it showed us we could still share life" (RT127). These findings support Metz's (2016) Ubuntu-based argument that embodied communal practices carry genuine reconciliatory power in African cultural contexts and demonstrate that symbolic acts performed within culturally meaningful frameworks can reduce hostility and generate hope even in the absence of formal justice mechanisms.

However, survivors articulated clear limits to symbolic reconciliation when it was unaccompanied by material support, and their critique directly challenges the theoretical adequacy of Ubuntu-based frameworks that treat symbolic gestures as sufficient. The critique was pointed and consistent: "They gave us trees but not food. How can we live on symbols?" (RT186); "We planted trees, we danced, we sang, but after that, nothing changed. Our homes were still broken, our children still hungry. These rituals became empty without real help" (RT010). This finding demands a critical qualification of Metz's (2016) optimism about the sufficiency of symbolic gestures in African contexts, providing survivor-level evidence that participants themselves judge the adequacy of reconciliation by its material consequences, not its cultural form. Through Lewin's (1947) framework, symbolic acts successfully initiate unfreezing by reducing hostility and generating hope; but without material refreezing through economic empowerment and livelihood restoration, communities remain suspended in precarious transition rather than consolidated in durable peace. Symbolic and material reconciliation are not alternatives, they are sequentially necessary conditions for durable coexistence.

Perceptions of Reconciliation Outcomes: Coexistence Without Trust

The most analytically significant finding of this study concerns how survivors conceptualised the outcome of reconciliation programs, and the precision with which they distinguished achieved coexistence from genuine reconciliation. The majority of participants acknowledged that programs had succeeded in reducing active hostility and containing revenge cycles: "If not for the forums, we would still be fighting" (RT021). Participants described a pragmatic coexistence, a functional capacity to share public space without violence, as the principal achievement of reconciliation programming: "We can now go to markets together, share roads, and talk without violence. It may not be deep trust, but it is better than living in hatred" (RT020). This outcome is analytically significant and practically consequential; the containment of inter-ethnic violence across two electoral cycles in a documented conflict hotspot constitutes a non-trivial achievement that reflects the cumulative effect of sustained, multi-actor intervention. Yet survivors carefully and repeatedly characterised this achievement as insufficient, fragile, and conditional, distinguishing it with precision from the trust-based coexistence they identified as genuine reconciliation.

This coexistence was widely characterised as sustained by suppressed grievance rather than resolved conflict, and as susceptible to collapse under political or economic stress. Survivors described living alongside former adversaries with maintained wariness: "We work together, we attend meetings, but we avoid deep connections. Trust is gone, and without it, reconciliation is only surface level" (RT209). The emotional landscape captured in non-participant observation data corroborates this finding, as shown in Table 2; hope and relaxation, indicative of reconciliation's partial positive impact, were present, but fear (28%), anger (20%), and surprise at continued impunity (32%) were the dominant affective registers. These affective data provide objective triangulation for the subjective accounts of conditional coexistence and confirm that programs had succeeded in modulating but not resolving the underlying emotional landscape of inter-ethnic relations in Kapseret.

Table 2: Observed Emotional Responses to Reconciliation Programs

Emotion	Freq.	%	Key Theme	Illustrative Participant Quote
Happy	6	24%	Community dialogues generating optimism	"Talking together makes me believe things can change."
Angry	5	20%	Presence of perpetrators walking free	"I see those who hurt us walking free; it makes me angry every day."
Surprised	8	32%	Perpetrators not held accountable	"We still fear meeting them in the village."
Fearful	7	28%	Struggles with forgiveness	"It is hard to forgive when the pain is still fresh."
Disgusted	4	16%	Superficial reconciliation efforts	"Meetings happen but nothing truly changes."
Unhappy	3	12%	Lack of clarity on reconciliation process	"We do not know what forgiveness really means here."
Relaxed	2	8%	Religious interventions providing comfort	"Prayer meetings make me feel at peace, even if just for a while."

Source: Field Data (2025)

These findings extend Zelizer's (2018) integrated peacebuilding framework, which distinguishes Galtung's (2016) negative peace from positive peace, by providing empirical evidence that survivors themselves articulate and operationalise this distinction without recourse to academic vocabulary. Participants described coexistence, negative peace, as a pragmatic achievement born of necessity rather than trust: "We live side by side, but we do not trust each other" (RT006). Genuine reconciliation, positive peace, they linked explicitly to justice, accountability, and material redress. The most consequential finding concerns survivors' assessment of reconciliation's durability: unresolved grievances were uniformly identified as structural threats to peace sustainability: "We are quiet now, but the pain is still inside. If the government does not deal with our losses, the anger will return. This peace is like a house without foundation, it can fall anytime" (RT021). In Lewin's (1947) theoretical terms, these accounts constitute survivor-level evidence of arrested transition: reconciliation programs achieved partial unfreezing by preventing revenge cycles, yet failed to refreeze communities in new stable equilibria because justice and material restitution, the structural forces required to consolidate change, remained unaddressed. This contradicts optimistic assessments in United Nations (2018) frameworks suggesting that participation alone ensures sustainable peace, and resonates with Osai et al.'s (2019) observation that post-conflict reconciliation without economic transformation plants the seeds of future violence.

1.5 Conclusion and Implications

Principal Findings and Theoretical Contributions

This study assessed whether participation in reconciliation programs fostered peaceful coexistence among victims and alleged perpetrators of PEV in Kapseret constituency, Kenya, and the answer is measured and conditional. Participation reduced active hostility and enabled a functional form of coexistence, but it did not produce the trust-based, justice-grounded reconciliation that survivors themselves define as genuine and durable. The study's principal theoretical contribution is its empirical validation of a crucial but often theoretically under-specified distinction: coexistence is not reconciliation. Survivors in Kapseret articulated this distinction with precision, identifying the specific conditions under which each is achievable and identifying the gap between them as constituting the central failure of existing interventions. This finding deepens Lewin's (1947) Theory of Change by demonstrating that reconciliation programs can achieve unfreezing and initiate movement while systematically failing to achieve refreezing, thereby leaving communities in a perpetual and fragile transitional state.

The study further challenges Metz's (2016) Ubuntu-based claim that symbolic gestures suffice in African reconciliation contexts by providing survivor-level evidence that material and legal dimensions of justice are equally essential to durable coexistence. Program design variables, particularly the origin of leadership, the integration of justice mechanisms, the provision of psychosocial support, and the sequencing of reconciliation relative to survivor readiness, fundamentally determine whether programs foster or impede healing. Church-led, government-led, and community-led formats produced markedly different outcomes, with community peace committees achieving the deepest legitimacy but remaining the most structurally vulnerable due to inadequate resourcing. The study also corroborates Kagwanja and Southall's (2013) structural analysis of Kenya's fragile post-2008 settlement and extends it by demonstrating that this fragility is not merely a macro-political phenomenon observable at the national level but is reproduced in the subjective experience of ordinary survivors at the constituency level, who understand their conditional coexistence as contingent on conditions that current policy frameworks have not fulfilled.

Practical Implications

For policymakers, the findings underscore the urgency of integrating reconciliation programming with justice mechanisms and material reparations as structurally necessary conditions for durable peace. The National Cohesion and Integration Commission, in partnership with county governments, should mandate that reconciliation programs address accountability as a precondition for forgiveness rather than an alternative to it, and should establish structured mechanisms for survivor recommendations to directly inform policy. Government barazas should transition from politically administered speech-delivery formats to survivor-centred listening forums that are sequenced to align with survivor readiness rather than administrative convenience. For peacebuilding practitioners, the study's findings on secondary trauma demand immediate reform of testimonial practices: inter-agency data sharing must replace competitive demands for repeated survivor testimony, and comprehensive psychosocial support must be integrated into reconciliation forums as a non-negotiable program component rather than an afterthought. Faith-based organisations should develop theologically grounded frameworks that hold forgiveness and accountability in creative tension, rather than positioning them as mutually exclusive imperatives.

The most strategically significant recommendation concerns community peace committees. Given their demonstrated superiority in legitimacy, cultural responsiveness, and conflict responsiveness relative to government and faith-based actors, CPCs should be institutionalised within county governance structures with regularised budgets, logistical support, and technical training. Treating CPCs as supplementary volunteer bodies rather than central peacebuilding infrastructure constitutes both a theoretical error, misreading local legitimacy as a supplement to state authority rather than as its foundation, and a practical failure that undermines the most promising element of Kenya's post-PEV reconciliation architecture. Without sustained institutional investment in CPCs, the grassroots capacity that this study identifies as the most effective driver of reconciliation progress will remain structurally precarious, dependent on individual goodwill in the absence of systemic support.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study's qualitative design generates depth of understanding but limits statistical generalisation across Kenya's diverse PEV-affected constituencies, and future research employing mixed methods designs would strengthen the evidentiary base for policy recommendations. The 2007 to 2017 timeframe, while appropriate for the study objectives, means that findings may not fully capture evolving community dynamics in the context of subsequent electoral cycles, including the 2017 election-related tensions that continued to test reconciliation gains in Uasin Gishu County. The study's reliance on participant recall for events occurring up to eighteen years prior introduces memory effects that qualitative triangulation partially but incompletely mitigates, and future research designs should consider prospective longitudinal approaches that follow reconciliation program participants over time. These limitations do not undermine the study's principal contributions but do identify the boundary conditions within which its findings should be interpreted and applied.

Three priority areas warrant future investigation. First, longitudinal research examining the intergenerational impacts of reconciliation program participation on children who experienced displacement during formative developmental years would significantly advance understanding of PEV's long-term social consequences and the conditions under which reconciliation gains are transmitted, or foreclosed, across generations. Second, comparative analysis across Kenya's conflict-affected constituencies, examining why similar reconciliation approaches produce different outcomes across varying ethnic compositions, political dynamics, and economic conditions, would provide actionable guidance for context-sensitive program design and would test the generalisability of this study's findings beyond Kapseret. Third, focused investigation of the relationship between economic empowerment, livelihood security, and willingness to reconcile would test the central hypothesis this study advances: that sustainable peace requires not only symbolic justice but material transformation enabling survivors to rebuild dignified, self-sufficient lives. Such research would directly inform the integrated reparations frameworks that this study's findings demonstrate are indispensable for sustainable coexistence in Kenya's post-election violence landscapes.

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