In the Shadows of Repressive Rule: Building Infrastructures for Peace Consolidation in The Gambia

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Acknowledgement

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Abstract

The departure of President Yahya Jammeh from the Gambian scene after two decades of repressive rule did not necessarily remove the structural conditions that are liable to foster political and social dislocations in that country. If anything, Mr. Jammeh had hollowed out the state and bequeathed to Gambians a set of bastardised institutions, and a brand of identity politics that continue to weigh heavily on social and political processes in the ongoing context of transition. Added to these are a myriad of fast-paced difficulties that state institutions seem unprepared to address. Under present circumstances, therefore, it is unlikely that the formal arena can wholly suffice as an adequate site for delivering the kind of interventions required to restore justice and foster reconciliation and social cohesion in The Gambia. This paper sought to investigate the main sources of vulnerability that render The Gambia state susceptible to conflicts and insecurities, and how the evolving infrastructure for peace (I4P) might help to keep to consolidate peace and keep the country on its keel. The findings suggest that The Gambia remains susceptible to a diversity of old and new threats that necessitate the establishment of an I4P as a complementary mechanism to bolster the resilience of the state against conflict. To be effective, however, the Gambian I4P needs to be embedded in local resources in order to attract broader support from the different scales and sites of society.

Introduction

After two decades of repressive rule, the people of The Gambia ushered in a new democratic dispensation in January 2017, hoping never to return to the dark days of tyranny presided over by former President Yahya Jammeh. The fulfillment of this aspiration and the consolidation of the democracy restored are, however, not likely to proceed along a smooth path. Certainly, the incumbent government headed by President Adama Barrow has instituted promising reforms, particularly in the justice and security sectors, while the release of political prisoners and the opening up of the political space have come to symbolise the termination of the more egregious practices, including torture, extrajudicial killings, and forced disappearance, that marked the preceding era under of Mr. Jammeh (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Undoubtedly, these initiatives are critical for restoring the legitimacy of the Gambian state in the eyes of its citizens and rebuilding public trust in its institutions. These notwithstanding, authoritarian collapse in The Gambia did not necessarily remove the structural conditions that are liable to foster political and social dislocations in that country. If anything, Mr. Jammeh had bequeathed to Gambians a legacy of human rights violations, a set of bastardised institutions, and a brand of identity politics that continue to weigh heavily on social and political processes in the ongoing context of transition (Republic of The Gambia & WANEP, 2019).

Moreover, the end of his twenty-two-year 'tyrannical peace', which effectively held in check open patterns of conflict among culturally defined groups, seems to have opened up new spaces for contestations and confrontations around horizontal inequality and corresponding unequal access to the political and economic apparatus of the state. Embedded in multiple and divergent forms of structural imbalance, including a hierarchical caste system rooted in the historically established division of labour (Hughes, 1982/1983; The Point, 2020), these relational dynamics continue to exert both direct and indirect influences on the political centre, while dividing and fragmenting the Gambian society. Added to these old unresolved challenges are "fast-paced burdens of new ones (e.g. influx of migrant returnees), [that] find many institutions unprepared, or simply outdated with respect to the policies, infrastructure, or instruments necessary to tackle the myriad obstacles", resulting in "a shaky sense of trust and confidence that characterize the state-society relationship" (Republic of The Gambia & WANEP, 2019: 6).

The nature and scope of these challenges, the hollowing out of the state, in particular, suggest that under present circumstances, the formal arena cannot wholly suffice as an adequate site for delivering the kind of interventions required to restore justice and foster reconciliation and social cohesion in The Gambia. The legacy of the state as a potent agent of atrocity and conflict challenges the monopoly of the state as a provider of security and peace. Thus, keeping the Gambian state on its keel and ensuring sustainable peace and security require complementary mechanisms based on whole-of-society approaches necessary for generating widely inclusive solutions that bolster the state's resilience against tyranny, injustices, and violence (Lederach, 2012; Richmond, 2013).

Indeed, the recognition has grown among critical stakeholders that an inclusive forum for dialogue and 'joint problem solving' attracts broader support from the different scales and cites of the Gambians (UNDP/DPA, 2017). Such a forum, built on embedded resources, is critical for mobilizing support from both formal and informal social agencies for conflict prevention and relational transformation, precisely because the challenges being encountered have their roots in political interchanges in both formal and informal locales. This inductive approach to peace, grounded in frameworks of conflict transformation, reconciliation, and nonviolence (Galtung, 1996; Lederach, 2012; Lund, 2009; Richmond, 2013; Zartma, 2000), represents an indispensable vent for the competition that liberal peacebuilding and its associated free market economics embody, particularly in plural societies with fragile democratic structures such as The Gambia, that is often characterised by horizontal inequalities and social grievances (Newman, 2011). Coming under the broader rubric of infrastructures for peace (I4P), this peace mechanism has gained increased traction among critical state agencies and civil society organisations (CSOs) in The Gambia, such as the Ministry of Interior, and the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding in The Gambia (WANEP-Gambia) respectively.

Thus, as part of the ongoing processes of peacebuilding, the process has been set in motion towards the establishment of a national infrastructure for peace in The Gambia to serve as a complementary forum for "conflict prevention, management, resolution and to build sustainable peaceful co-existence and a range of other functions to ensure durable peace" (Republic of The Gambia & WANEP, 2020). In line with these objectives, a technical delegation constituted by officials of the Ministry of Interior of The Gambia and WANEP-Gambia embarked on a study visit to Ghana in March 2019. The purpose of the study tour was "to learn from the experience of Ghana" in terms of the events and processes that culminated in the

establishment of the National Peace Council (NPC), which serves as Ghana's national infrastructure for peace, and how the NPC works to prevent conflicts. Subsequently, a Technical Working Group (TWG) was established to coordinate and operationalise its establishment and effective functioning. Additionally, consultative processes have been undertaken to explore the infrastructural type that might serve as the most appropriate and effective mechanism across different scales and sites in the Gambian context, as well as the existing frameworks that could be drawn upon to build such a mechanism and the most effective approaches through which it may be established.

Against this backdrop, and as part of its contribution to the promotion of peace and security in West Africa, the Kofi Anan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC) commissioned two-week field research in The Gambia, in March 2021, with funding support from the Government of Denmark. The overarching purpose of the research was to: 1) examine the major sources of vulnerability that render The Gambia susceptible to conflicts and insecurities; and 2) to reflect on the process towards the establishment of an I4P that might help to prevent conflict while consolidating peace in that country. The study mainly involved in-depth qualitative interviews with critical stakeholders including state officials and civil society actors. The research also benefitted immensely from presentations and structured and unstructured (informal) discussions at a related conference organized by the KAIPTC in Banjul, The Gambia, in June, 2021, on the domestication of atrocity prevention norms at the state level, which was also sponsored by the Government of Denmark. This paper outlines the main findings of the study, beginning with a discussion of the potential sources of threat to peace and security in The Gambia. It then proceeds to discuss the idea of peace infrastructure and subsequently outlines specific processes that need to be considered in the ongoing drive toward the establishment of an I4P in The Gambia. The paper concludes with a summary of the key points of the discussion.

Major Sources of Threat to Peace and Security in The Gambia

The Gambia is currently grappling with a diversity of threats that carry the potential to undercut the ongoing transition from authoritarianism to the rule of law and constitutionalism. These challenges, which existing structures and mechanisms are struggling to cope with, run the gamut from a manifest disaffection by a segment of the Gambian society with a primordial hierarchical caste system that appears to sit uneasily with the current drive towards democratisation, to a dislocated system of land administration and troubling magnitude of youth unemployment. Moreover, critical ills that marked the preceding era of authoritarian rule, including corruption and nepotism among those with power and influence seem to be resisting the ongoing wind of change, while there are huge uncertainties about the outcomes of the transitional justice process. The combined effects of these challenges have meant that the initial euphoria and "political hope" that accompanied the departure of Mr. Jammeh seems to be giving way to a feeling of uncertainty and "political despair" among broader segments of the Gambia populace, including the youth (Republic of The Gambia & WANEP, 2019: 20). The findings of the study relating to the most critical challenges are discussed below.

Gambia's Caste System in the Context of Democratisation

- *Gambia's caste system sits uneasily with the current drive towards democratization; growing defiance of its rules is resulting in tensions and conflicts that current structures and mechanisms are not adequate to contain.*

A major finding of the research suggests that caste-related tensions and clashes between 'slaves' and 'nobles', which carry the potential to undermine peace, security, and social cohesion in The Gambia are on the ascendancy. Many Gambian societies, the Sarahule most particularly, but also the Mandinka and Wolof, are organized along historically structured hierarchical caste systems that are closely linked to the corresponding division of labour. These societies are traditionally divided into three major hierarchical strata, notably (Hughes (1982/1983):
o landowning nobles/aristocracy/freeborn;
o artisans (such as blacksmiths or metal workers, leather workers, wood carvers, and cloth weavers) and courtiers (entertainers/praise singers or griots;
o and slaves.

Though this social stratification is well-established, and while disdain towards lower social castes, slaves, in particular, is commonplace, especially in the Sarahule society of URR, many 'low caste' persons have, either through education or technical/vocational skills, become wealthy or influential. Yet, disdain and discrimination can be found towards such persons even when they rise to the political centre. Thus, during the field research, a high-ranking legislator narrated the account of a sitting Member of the Gambian National Assembly whose representation was denied by the noble caste in his constituency under his lower caste status, even though he was duly

elected. This is one of the multiple examples of how the caste system, directly and indirectly, transcends the politics of informal locales to influence political dynamics in formal-legal structures.

Also, under the framework of the caste system, it is not permissible in certain communities for persons of lower caste status to serve as Imams. Sanctions imposed on 'violators' range from a fine to banishment from their communities, although such practices contravene the 1997 Constitution of the Republic of The Gambia. Yet, such discriminations permeate every aspect of life and the afterlife such that it is not permissible for slaves and their masters to be buried in the same cemetery in certain communities; just as intermarriages between these castes are highly frowned upon by the freeborn or noble class. These patterns of discrimination have been the source of acrimonious relations and clashes in many communities, since the advent of the transition, as the so-called slaves begin, more forcefully, to assert their rights and freedoms under the Constitution (The Voice, 2020). The ensuing tensions and clashes between those determined to sustain the *status quo* and those seeking to revise it have become a source of threat to peace, security, and social cohesion in The Gambia.

In August 2020, for instance, the Gambian National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) called on the government to intervene and address the surging cases of caste-based tensions and conflicts in the country, with particular reference to the Upper River Region (URR) of The Gambia (National Human Rights Commission, 2020). The call had been triggered by a Foroyaa newspaper report, which alleged that the 'Alkalo' or traditional ruler of Garawol Village, in URR, had imposed a fine of twenty thousand dalasis, and in lieu banishment, on an Arabic school teacher for leading a supposed slave class in Islamic prayers on one of the two Islamic holidays celebrated each year, in contravention of established caste rules (Fatty, 2020). The teacher and his lower caste members were subsequently "banned from performing or attending any congregation prayers at the village central mosque and other public places within the village", resulting in bad blood and tension in the community (Fatty, 2020). Indeed, fact-finding missions conducted by the NHRC in parts of the country since 2019 reveal "a long-standing traditional practice that subjects 'slaves' to tedious, and sometimes degrading, jobs for their 'masters' or 'nobles'. In extreme cases, the affected group has reported physical attacks on some of their members" (National Human Rights Commission, 2020).

Such practices run counter to the letter and spirit of the 1997 Constitution of The Gambia, which provides that "No person shall be held in slavery or servitude" (Art 20 (1), and also that (2) "No person shall be required to perform forced labour" (Art 20 (2) (The Republic of The Gambia, 1997). The ongoing context of change and democratisation is generating new dynamics that not only challenge the caste-based status quo but also provide the impetus for changing economic and power relations which have the potential to upset peace and security if not properly managed. The conflict-inducing potential of the system is not difficult to understand if one takes into account the fact that group marginalization and discrimination remain the prime source of violent conflicts in plural societies (Stewart, 2008).

Poor Land Governance and Administration

- Land-related disputes are fast degenerating into open conflicts that current policies and administrative mechanisms are not adequate to address.

Another major driver of conflict, cited by nearly all research participant, was poor land governance and administration and their concomitant disputes and violence, which are increasingly becoming difficult to cope with under existing policies and institutional arrangements. The Gambia currently lacks a "national policy or unifying framework, one that also accounts for overlapping and interwoven customary, religious, and statutory systems of stewardship and …. mapping for land demarcation and communal ownership boundaries, [making] upkeep with rapid urban development a daunting task" (Republic of The Gambia & WANEP, 2019: 8). The absence of effective policies and legal or institutional protections means that land ownership, acquisition, and transfers have become all the more complicated, resulting in tenure insecurity. Amidst the surge in the value of land and real estate in the context of transition, existing customary and statutory systems of land administration have become increasingly amenable to manipulation and abuse as land is sold and bought in ways that depart from long-established traditions and customs of land-borrowing common among most Gambian communities. As such, dispossession, 'disinheritance', and outright land grabbing, as well as indiscriminate selling and conversion of farmlands into real estate and other commercial holdings involving mostly foreign investors and real estate developers are becoming critical sources of conflict within and among communities. The magnitude of the land problem is depicted by the city of Brikama, for example, where "up to 90% of the court cases or backlog are reported to be land-related" (Republic of The Gambia & WANEP, 2019: 22). While these

micro-level conflicts have thus far remained localized, they have the potential to spin out of control into macro-level or national/regional conflicts, when they get embroiled in wider processes of exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization, and when the belief manifests that peaceful action or nonviolence is no longer a viable strategy for change. Indications of this have been visible in many Gambian communities such as Faraba Banta, Gunjur, and Sanyang, which have seen varying forms of protests, violence, and killings linked to land and poor regulatory and oversight mechanisms relating to extractive activities of foreign enterprises both on land and at sea. In Sanyang, for example, tensions resulted in the burning down of a police station and Chinese-owned fishmeal. Commenting on the incident, a youth leader interviewed in Banjul noted that:

> The state allocated lands to the Chinese to establish fishmeal, which is undermining tourism [due to its polluting effect], while young people are not employed by the Chines, but by foreign nationals who are mostly Senegalese, leading to unemployment and crime in the Gambia. In times of conflict, the government protects the Chines. This is why the youth burned down the fishmeal and police station in Sanyang.

The lack of effective regulation is resulting in wanton transfers of farmlands into commercial holdings, illegal fishing, pollution, and unfair competition with local fishers that are giving rise to frustrations and sparking tensions in communities. The poor management of tensions between the youth and foreign-owned industries is undermining the trust of a segment of the population who are, in some instances, taking the law into their own hands.

Political Polarisation and Governance Issues

Polarization of the political space, concerns over the implementation of the TRRC report and critical governance deficits relating to the stalled constitutional process, state capacity, and allegations of malfeasance are combining to create uncertainties about the future stability of the country Since he assumed office in January 2017, President Barrow has set in motion critical reforms in the security and justice sectors, together with a constitutional review process to replace the 1997 Constitution. The constitutional review process has, however, stalled as the draft constitution, though enjoying broad public support (Jaw, 2020), failed to receive the 75% required majority vote in parliament at the second reading in September 2020 (Nabaneh, 2020). Key among the reasons for not passing the draft document has been the political question of whether the presidential term limit should operate retroactively, and the implications

that might have for President Barrow (Houlihan, 2020), whose cabinet had submitted a paper to the Constitutional Review Commission "arguing that the current term of the president should not count" (Jaw, 2020).

This position differs completely from that provided for in the proposed constitution, implying that the first term of the President would count towards his term limit. In the meantime, therefore, it is the "Jammeh's constitution", which the former President amended "50 times – such as to remove term limits and change the requirement for electoral victory from an absolute majority to a plurality –to consolidate his power" (Jaw, 2020) that continues to apply. His declaration of The Gambia as an Islamic state also remains a particularly sticky point in the absence of a new constitution.

Meanwhile, Mr. Barrow's coalition government itself has been dogged by multiple cracks and mistrust partly attributed to his failure to honour one of his electoral promises while running for office in 2016, and the ensuing protests it has generated from such movements as Three Years Jotna (Jotna, meaning 'enough' in Wolof, hence Three Years is enough). In 2016, then-independent candidate Barrow had agreed under the founding charter of the 2016 Coalition, for which he stood as flagbearer, and proclaimed to the people of The Gambia that if elected, he would serve for just three years as a transitional leader and subsequently oversee the conduct of fresh elections which he would not contest (Soumaré, 2020). Not only did he renege on his promise, but Mr. Barrow also went on to found his political party, the National People's Party (NPP), and subsequently filed to contest the 2021 elections. Earlier, in 2019, the crisis of cohesion and tension that plagued the government had manifested most obviously in the dismissal of Vice President Darboe, who headed the United Democratic Party (UDP), one of the coalition parties in the government (Republic of The Gambia & WANEP, 2019), diverting attention away from the critical issues of poverty, infrastructural decay, and poor social service delivery confronting the country. As the Director of a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working in The Gambia concluded, "the initial coalition that brought the President to power has collapsed, and people are not happy....Moreover, there is a lack of trust". Added to this has been a litany of allegations of corruption and nepotism and other malfeasance involving the President and members of his government (Republic of The Gambia & WANEP, 2019).

Further complicating these challenges are issues of political polarization and political party militancy or vigilantism, which became particularly pronounced

in the days leading up to the 2021 elections. As the Director quoted above further noted, "Political polarization remains a huge problem. In Gambia, political parties are organized along ethnic and linguistic lines," implying that major national issues and debates including political party activities and the reform of the security sector are informed by identity politics and related considerations. As a result, as a youth leader in Banjul noted, "People have become less tolerant of criticisms and there is a lack of control by the political leader over their supporters. Unfortunately, some of the party militants are retired security personnel."

Another critical issue that was cited as having the potential to undermine peace and security in The Gambia relates to the outcomes of the transitional justice process, which centres around the work of the Transitional Justice and Reparation Commission (TRRC). Critical among the multiple issues raised by research participants was the concern that the recommendations of the Commission may not be implemented. Reasons cited for this concern included claims that perpetrators associated with the former regime are still in active service in the civil and security services. According to a research participant working with a regional organization in The Gambia, "There are still people in government accused of past atrocities". Another reason advanced was that the President has tended to overlook the proposed recommendations of other recent committees or commissions such as the Faraba Banta Commission of Inquiry relating to police shootings, which led to the death of three men during a protest in Faraba Banta village. There was also the allegation that the President is seeking to appease the Jola people in the Foni area, the ethnic group of the former president, through non-prosecution, to tap into that political base for electoral purposes. Non-implementation of the recommendations can inspire spirals of private revenge or "self-help justice", that can undermine processes of reconciliation and social cohesion as we as the peace and security of the country.

Meanwhile, the issue of reparation, which is an integral element of the transitional justice process, was identified as one that could raise high expectations that lead to frustrations as there exists no coherent scheme regarding how reparation, which many interpreted as monetary payments, would be delivered.

Other governance challenges related to the critical issue of state capacity, which, according to the head of an international agency in The Gambia, has meant that "the security architecture of the state has been externalized to Nigeria, Senegal and ECOMIG', the peacekeeping mission deployed by the regional bloc ECOWAS. The interviewee further explained that over-reliance on regional partners in the maintenance of security has meant that the government often finds it difficult to deal with issues involving citizens of Senegal, for example. Other governance and security-related issues emphasized include the following:

o absence of a transitional framework;
o lack of a clear governance roadmap;
o lack of clear communication strategy;
o the domination of the security agencies by people from the Jola ethnic group; and
o the dilemma regarding ethnic rebalancing of the security sector and perceptions of victor's justice.

On the whole, the polarization of the political space, concerns over the implementation of the TRRC report and critical governance deficits relating to the stalled constitutional process, state capacity, and allegations of malfeasance are combining to create uncertainties about the future stability of the country.

Widening Ethno-Political and Religious Tensions

- The instrumentalisation of identity politics and widening sectarian and ethnic cleavages are emerging as critical threats to social cohesion in The Gambia.

Closely related to the issue of political polarization are growing concerns around the instrumentalisation of identity politics and widening sectarian and ethnic cleavages that threaten social cohesion in The Gambia. Identity politics linked to linguistic and ethnic affinities was identified not only as becoming increasingly pervasive but their deliberate instrumentalisation was highlighted as structuring political competition in the context of transition. As captured in a report, "ethnic tensions and 'ethnopolitics' are also on the rise, featuring more concretely in the perception and lived experiences of Gambians....in promotions, hiring, and firing". (Republic of The Gambia & WANEP, 2019: 7). Equally troubling is the problem of sectarian tensions between the majority Sunni Muslim and the minority Ahmadiyya Muslim communities. The findings suggest that the Supreme Islamic Council (SIC), which provides Islamic religious guidance does not recognize the Ahmadiyyas as true members of the Islamic faith. Ahmadiyyas are, therefore, marginalized and excluded from most activities involving Muslims in the country. Similarly, the declaration of The Gambia as the Islamic Republic in 2016 by Mr. Jammeh has become one of the most contentious issues between the majority of Muslims (95%) and minority Christens (5%) who find themselves in a similar marginalized position. Thus, the omission of the word "secular" about the republic

in the draft constitution was considered problematic by Christians who advocated for its inclusion as they were concerned it might serve as a potential ground for marginalization or persecution. Meanwhile, some Muslims advocated for a noncircular republic.

Youth Unemployment and 'Back Way Returnees'

Huge unemployment among young people and the influx of backway returnees expose the Gambian youth to multiple risks and vulnerabilities that could undermine peace and security in the country

Youth unemployment, which currently stands at 41.5% (Republic of The Gambia & WANEP, 2019), remains a serious problem in The Gambia, responsible for many young people living in poverty. Certainly, unemployment alone may not be sufficient to engender conflicts. The onset of conflicts often depends on multiple factors feeding people's frustrations and grievances. The problem is that the combination of unemployment and the multiple challenges highlighted above seems to provide a context in which it would be naïve to fail to recognise the likelihood of conflict onset. Further complicating this fragile situation is the influx of migrant returnees in similar precarious positions mostly from Europe, popularly known in The Gambia as 'Back Way Returnees' "who have also experienced violence and trauma during their journeys northward also harbor the effects of trauma, without the proper tools and capacities to manage them or related issues and vulnerabilities effectively and constructively" (Republic of The Gambia & WANEP, 2019: 43). The multiple barriers faced by the youth renders them vulnerable, for example, to the promises of violent extremist, which can, in turn, accentuate the already precarious political and economic challenges confronting the country.

An Infrastructure for Peace as a Mechanism for a Peaceful Resilient Society

If the challenges highlighted above point to anything, it is that the Gambian state remains weak and that existing structures and mechanisms are not adequate to provide the kind of framework needed to bolster the resilience of the state and its society to conflicts. Building a resilient society that has the "capacities to foster greater social and political cohesion and to address the structural causes of fragility" (Ryan, 2012: 14) demands a systemic or whole of societal approaches, which ensures the generation of broader support and widely inclusive solutions to the critical challenges being encountered. As such, the drive towards the establishment of a national infrastructure for peace in The Gambia is particularly pertinent and timely. While an I4P for the Gambia is not a panacea to all the problems the country is grappling with, a national peace mechanism if effective can serve as a

complementary forum for the prevention of conflict that allows the state to build peace on its terms and move away from the path of fragility to that of resilience. This section of the paper reflects on how The Gambia can establish the infrastructural support to aid the political, social, and cultural transformations based on ideas of hybridity, nonviolence, and conflict prevention in more specific and concrete situations - beginning with a brief discussion of the very idea of I4P.

Understanding the Concept of I4P

Although I4Ps has increasingly gained traction in many developing countries, including Ghana, Kenya, and Nepal, there is no universally agreed conceptualization of the term, nor is there an infrastructural model that fits all contexts. Rather, answers to the question of what exactly the concept signifies have tended to differ from one expert to another, and from organization to organization, partly due to the current work-in-progress status of the concept, implying that it continues to embrace new ideas that broaden its scope. It is widely recognized, however, that the concept of I4P was popularised by John Paul Lederach in his 1997 book titled Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies. In that book, Lederach (1997, p. xvi) notes that the changing nature and scope of conflict in the post-Cold War era suggest the need for concepts and approaches that transcend the "traditional statist diplomacy", and that peace-building in contemporary times require "long-term commitment to establishing an infrastructure across the levels of a society, an infrastructure that empowers the resources for reconciliation from within that society...). According to him, an I4P "relies on a foundation of multiple actors and activities aimed at achieving and sustaining reconciliation" (p. 4). Thus, the roots of I4P are deeply steeped in ideas of bottom-up peacebuilding, nonviolence, hybridity, reconciliation, and conflict prevention and transformation (Galtung, 1996; Hove & Harris, 2019; Lederach, 2012/1997; Lund, 2009; Richmond, 2013). Although the idea of reconciliation was central to the original formulation of the concept by Lederach, subsequent reflections on I4P have tended to portray it as an instrument of peacebuilding (Kovacsas, 2016). For instance, the often quoted definition offered by UNDP (2013) conceptualises I4P as "a network of interdependent systems, resources, values, and skills held by the government, civil society and community institutions that promote dialogue and consultation; prevent conflict and enable peaceful mediation when violence occurs in a society". According to Kumar & De la Haye (2012), representatives from fourteen African meeting in Naivasha, Kenya, in 2010, agreed on a conceptualization of I4P as a "dynamic network of interdependent structures, mechanisms, resources, values, and skills which, through dialogue

and consultation, contribute to conflict prevention and peace-building in a society." Thus, I4P relates to the process of building from within specific societies relevant institutions, resources, and capacities for effective peacebuilding at different scales and sites of those societies to transform issues and relationships necessary to prevent violent conflicts.

The references to different scales and sites suggest that peace processes are by no means the preserve of the state and that they "unfold simultaneously at multiple levels of society, requiring a systemic view of complexity and change" (Lederach, 2012: p. 9). As noted earlier, and as the case of The Gambia attests, the fact that states sometimes feature as key purveyors of atrocities and conflict challenges the monopoly of the state as a provider of peace, diffusing the responsibility for peace maintenance to both state and non-state actors, and placing the society, including communities at the center of peace (Richmond, 2013). The idea of I4P, therefore, recognizes the agency of society - the village, the community, or the city - as both objects and subjects of peace that is not relegated to the margins by states and markets. As such, the components of I4Ps are composed of both state and non-state actors (van-Tongeren, 2013) that include:
- national peacebuilding platforms or forums;
- local/national peace committees;
- national peace councils;
- conflict analysis and early warning & response system'
- peacebuilding support units; and
- indigenous forums of conflict transformation and reconciliation.

Towards the Establishment of an I4P in The Gambia

As part of the broader process of peacebuilding in The Gambia, the idea of I4P had been identified as a critical mechanism for buttressing the resilience of the state and its society to conflict to shift from the path of fragility. As noted earlier, therefore, several tentative steps have been taken towards the establishment of an I4P in the country that includes a study tour by a technical delegation to Ghana, the establishment of a TWG mandated to coordinate and operationalise the establishment of the Gambian I4P, while a consultative process has been set in motion to solicit the views of the people towards the establishment of the mechanism. Against this backdrop, it seems timely and pertinent to reflect on the process with suggestions on critical steps for consideration as outlined below.

Devising a Gambian I4P for a Gambian Context
While I4Ps may share the broad objective of building state resilience against violent conflicts, no two peace infrastructures are exactly the same, nor is there a ready-made infrastructural model that fits all contexts, just

as there is no single approach to their establishment. Aside from the idea that the concept of I4P is still in its infancy, and therefore, amenable to evolving ideas, peace infrastructures tend to defer in most significant dimensions as they are designed and operationalised to respond to unique challenges in specific contexts. For example, much as Ghana and The Gambia may share similar attributes relating, for instance, to state capacity weakness and the phenomenon of the youth bulge, the two contexts differ significantly when one takes the caste system, which bears directly on political processes the Gambia but not visible in Ghana. Thus the political situation and conflict conditions that I4Ps address varies from country to country. Moreover, I4Ps may either be incorporated into pre-existing institutions subject to modifications, where such frameworks already exist or created from scratch. Either way, what is required is a contextualized peace infrastructure that recognize and responds to the particularities of The Gambian state and its societies with a focus on broader participation and support to generate widely inclusive solutions to the challenges being encountered. It is unlikely that the proposed I4P would be effective if it is merely modeled along generic templates or a one-size-fits-all logic in terms of structures, membership or composition, mandates, or roles/functions.

Critical Initial Processes

The effectiveness of an I4P would depend among other priorities on the initial processes that frame subsequent interventions or activities. Thus, the following initial steps may be useful for the modification of preexisting mechanisms or establishing one from scratch:

Step 1: Conduct an environmental scan or baseline research

One of the first critical steps in seeking to establish an I4P relates to the conduct of an environmental scan or baseline research to identify the pattern of vulnerability and potential opportunities through data gathering and analysis, similar to the Conflict and Development Analysis conducted by WANEP-Gambia (Republic of The Gambia & WANEP, 2019). Such a study is critical for identifying needs, opportunities as well as approaches that can maximise the effectiveness of the infrastructure. Research conducted for this purpose may take the form of analytical baseline assessments on the current status of conflict prevention, early warning mechanisms, and justice delivery through which it is possible to identify the necessary gaps and define the problems that need to be addressed. The research will be required to inform policy guidelines, relevant benchmarks, and practical strategic proposals for the establishment, management and monitoring, and evaluation of peace infrastructures. Ethnography will particularly be required in The Gambia

to understand political and social relations around the caste system and how the proposed I4P may respond to the system, which is increasingly becoming difficult to sustain.

Step 2: Identify pre-existing institutions, networks, and mechanisms that can be drawn on

This can be achieved by asking the following questions:

i. Which institutions or networks have conflict prevention and early warning as a primary goal?
ii. What is the mandate of these institutions and where do they derive from?
iii. How can these institutions be adapted and strengthened to prevent conflicts?
The findings of the research suggest that specific mechanisms exist in the Gambia that could be drawn upon as a building block in the establishment of the national peace infrastructure. Included among those specified by research participants are the following:
- WANEP-Gambia;
- Alternative Dispute Resolution Centre;
- District Tribunal of Chiefs;
- Council of Elders;
- Mediation Committees (Such as the Brikama Mediation Committee;
- Peace Ambassadors;
- 'Sanankuya' or "joking kinships", "joking relationships", "special affinities", "cousinage";
- Alkalos or traditional rulers; and
- Village Development Committees

Step 3: Assess Capacity Requirements and Assets

As the discussion above on the sources of vulnerability suggests The Gambia is currently constrained by state capacity weakness, a feature common to most countries making the transition from authoritarianism to the rule of law and constitutionalism. Countries in transition often embark on the path of peacebuilding with dysfunctional institutional structures that include the system of knowledge production and diffusion as well as the criminal justice system (UNDP, 2007/2008). The UNDP (2008, p. 4) defines capacity development as "'the process through which individuals, organizations and societies obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their development objectives over time." Capacity building, which underpins the principles of national ownership and sustainability, is understood to transcend the conduct of specific training programmes to include support strategies for accountability and long-term investment in education and learning, although training is considered the basic engine for capacity (United Nations, 2007).

Step 4: Map out the critical stakeholders

I4Ps are constructed based largely on local resources and underpinned by local ownership to ensure their sustainability. Thus, it is vital to map out the critical stakeholders who will most impact but also be impacted by the process to secure the buy-in and support of critical stakeholders. This includes both state and non-state actors at different levels of society. Effectiveness functioning of I4Ps requires continuous balancing and integration of multiple relationships and objectives that ensure wider and inclusive participation, gender sensitivity, legitimacy, and local ownership and sustainability. Effective stakeholder engagement, in turn, requires stakeholder mapping.

Step 5: Explore stable sources of funding to ensure neutrality and effectiveness

The effectiveness of I4Ps greatly depends on their neutrality and independence from political interference, without which it is difficult to win the trust and confidence of the people. This, in turn, requires sustainable sources of funding that reduce the reliance on the mechanism of government.

Approaches to Establishing a Gambian I4P
As noted no two I4ps are exactly the same; nor is there a single approach to their establishment. While no universally prescribed approaches exist, the establishment of peace infrastructures may be modeled along a range of approaches, based on the contextual particularities of states and societies in question. These are often categorized into two major approaches that have emerged from best practices:
- Bottom-up approaches; and
- Top-down approaches.

Bottom-up approaches and top-down approaches generally differ in terms of the following variables:
- Historical development;
- Structure;
- Mandate;
- Role/function;
- Political support; and
- Resources.

Bottom-up approaches to the establishment of peace infrastructures involve mechanisms that are mostly grounded in and emerge from societal or unofficial sources, These approaches often begin

with local communities or civil society organizations (CSOs) actively engaging in the transformation of conflict. A typical example of a bottom-up approach might include the "joking relationships", or "cousinage", which are customary ties common to most Gambian ethnic groupings such as Mandinka, Jola, Fulbe, Wolof, Serahule, Serer, and Bambara are linked through multiple cross-cutting ties, including joking kinship (Davidheiser, 2006). Top-down approaches, on the other, invariably originate from official sources. Top-down approaches may be called into being, for instance, through the adoption of specific legislation.

Conclusion

This paper set out to investigate the major sources of vulnerability that render The Gambia state susceptible to conflicts and insecurities and to reflect on the critical steps that need to be considered in its quest to establish an I4P that might help to bolster the state's resilience to conflict. The findings suggest that Gambian remains weak and susceptible to multiple and diverse sources of threats and that existing structures and mechanisms are not adequate to respond effectively to these threats. Among others, the results show that Gambia's caste system sits uneasily with the current drive towards democratisation, and that growing defiance of its rules is resulting in tensions and conflicts in communities. Also, land-related disputes are fast degenerating into open conflicts among individuals and groups that current policies and administrative mechanisms are not adequate to deal with. In addition, the results show that polarization of the political space, concerns over the implementation of the TRRC report, and critical governance deficits relating to the stalled constitutional process, state capacity, and allegations of malfeasance are combining to create uncertainties about the future stability of the country. Other sources of the vulnerability identified revolve around the instrumentalisation of identity politics and widening sectarian and ethnic cleavages that are emerging as critical threats to social cohesion in The Gambia; and huge unemployment rates among young people and the influx of backway returnees, which expose the Gambians multiple risks and vulnerabilities. While the establishment of an I4P is not a panacea to the problems being encountered, a national peace mechanism if effective can serve as a complementary forum for generating widely inclusive solutions that allow the state to build peace on its terms and move away from the path of fragility to that of resilience.