



Building a Culture of Peace: Lessons from the Ubunye & Ukuthula Community Initiatives in Mthatha, Eastern Cape

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Executive Summary

Mthatha, in South Africa's Eastern Cape, faces high levels of violent crime, unemployment, and weak cooperation among institutions. The Ubunye project piloted a collaborative, community-led peacebuilding approach that brought together traditional leaders and multiple stakeholders for ongoing dialogue, mediation training, and the creation of local peace forums.

The Ukuthula project took this further by strengthening dialogue between communities and national governance and linking community initiatives to South Africa's ongoing national dialogue processes. The project showed that lasting peace requires continuous engagement, genuine local ownership, and respect for existing customary structures.

The project showed that lasting peace requires continuous engagement, genuine local ownership, and respect for existing customary structures. Key outcomes included improved relationships among stakeholders, co-developed training curricula, local peace forums, and formal engagements with CoGTA at provincial and national levels.

The brief suggests that government and donors should institutionalize stakeholder mapping, incorporate mediation and trauma training into local governance, establish funded multi-level peace forums, strengthen links between customary and formal institutions, and shift from short-term funding to multi-year, process-oriented support.



These issues are worsened by high unemployment, poor infrastructure, and inadequate service delivery¹. Despite these challenges, traditional leaders, civil society organisations, religious figures, school principals, and community structures are actively working to prevent and resolve local conflicts, often with limited resources.

However, community mistrust of the South African Police Service (SAPS), along with tensions between traditional and municipal leaders in some areas, hampers the ability of stakeholders to pool resources and coordinate effective responses.

Meanwhile, existing structures such as Community Policing Forums (CPFs) and the Administrative Clerks assigned to traditional councils by the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) remain underused.

This policy brief draws on the experience of the Ubunye and Ukuthula project pilots in the Mthatha area to demonstrate how a collaborative, locally grounded approach to peacebuilding can build trust, strengthen relationships, and support long-term social cohesion. The initiative pivots on the invitation and support of traditional leaders. This brief outlines the approach used, what was learned, and what it means for policy.

Why Localised Approaches Matter

South African law and policy already require multi-sectoral collaboration in governance and violence prevention. Relevant frameworks include the Local Government Municipal Systems Act (2000), the Domestic Violence Act (1998), the Traditional and Khoi-San Leadership Act (2019), and the National Peace Accord (1991). Yet municipalities and communities often lack the tools and support needed to translate these frameworks into effective and locally appropriate action.

¹Rowan Madzamba, "Socio-Economic Factors Associated with Teenage Pregnancy in the Mandela Park Community of Mthatha, South Africa," *Commonwealth Youth and Development* 19, no. 1 (2021): 12 pages-12 pages, <https://doi.org/10.25159/2663-6549/9464>; Tankiso Makhetha, "Mthatha Extortion Cases Underreported, Says General Fannie Masemola," *News24*, n.d., accessed March 18, 2026, <https://www.news24.com/southafrica/news/mthatha-extortion-cases-underreported-says-general-fannie-masemola-20240908>.

Research² consistently shows that sustainable peacebuilding requires approaches that:

- Build on existing local structures, relationships, and knowledge rather than replacing them
- Repair damaged relationships and social trust, not only address visible symptoms of violence
- Involve community members as co-creators, not just beneficiaries
- Maintain sustained engagement over time, rather than delivering one-off events

In the Eastern Cape, traditional leaders, headmen, and sub-headmen play a vital role in resolving disputes related to land, marriage, resources, and community safety through customary processes³. Religious leaders, school principals, and community counsellors perform similar functions within their domains. When these structures are recognised and supported alongside formal institutions such as the Magistrates' Courts and SAPS, conflict resolution becomes quicker, more legitimate, and more likely to lead to enduring solutions⁴.

Despite this potential, significant gaps remain. Dialogue between formal institutions and traditional structures is sporadic. Multi-stakeholder networks are weak. Many interventions lack continuity, undermining the trust they set out to build.

The project was guided by four principles:

1. Transformation: Approach local challenges as opportunities for sustainable change rather than issues needing quick solutions. This involves adopting a long-term perspective, transforming relationships from adversarial to cooperative, and recognising the limitations of traditional peacebuilding methods⁵.
2. Localisation: Supporting local agency and ownership by ensuring that community stakeholders co-led the design and implementation of activities, rather than receiving externally designed solutions⁶.

²Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver P. Richmond, "The Local Turn in Peace Building: A Critical Agenda for Peace," *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 5 (2013): 763–83; Thania Paffenholz et al., "Toward a Third Local Turn: Identifying and Addressing Obstacles to Localization in Peacebuilding," *Negotiation Journal* 39, no. 4 (2023): 349–75, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nejo.12444>.

³Lungisile Ntsebeza, *Democracy Compromised: Chiefs and the Politics of the Land in South Africa*, vol. 5 (Brill, 2005), [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=IBJYEAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR3&dq=Ntsebeza,+L.++\(2005\).+Democracy+compromised:+Chiefs+and+the+politics+of+the+land+in+South+Africa.+Leiden:+Brill.+&ots=WsQVX8ohAq&sig=Is_eStq2Kq7y51OxUe2J4b6gdOE](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=IBJYEAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR3&dq=Ntsebeza,+L.++(2005).+Democracy+compromised:+Chiefs+and+the+politics+of+the+land+in+South+Africa.+Leiden:+Brill.+&ots=WsQVX8ohAq&sig=Is_eStq2Kq7y51OxUe2J4b6gdOE).

⁴Tsegai Berhane Ghebretkle and Macdonald Rammala, "Traditional African Conflict Resolution: The Case of South Africa and Ethiopia," *Mizan Law Review* 12, no. 2 (2018): 325–47.

⁵John Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation: Clear Articulation Of The Guiding Principles By A Pioneer In The Field* (Good Books, 2003).

⁶Mac Ginty and Richmond, "The Local Turn in Peace Building."

What Was Learned?

The Right Environment Transforms Relationships

Phase	Activities
Stakeholder Mapping and Dialogue	Individual meetings with traditional leaders, SAPS, ward councillors, schools, churches, and youth groups; joint preliminary dialogue to validate and deepen understanding
Digital Mapping	Development of a stakeholder map showing relationships, power flows, influence, and breakdowns
Co-Creation of Training	Individual meetings to co-design training curricula based on stakeholder-identified needs
Workshops and Training	Week-long trauma support and mediation workshops at Thabase Jumba Traditional Council, with participants from neighbouring councils and Mthatha; additional training of women traditional leaders, and CoGTA officials in mediation and peace leadership through Ukuthula
Peace Forum Formation	Establishment of three local peace forums and one coordinating body
Institutional Linkages	Ongoing dialogue with CoGTA at provincial and national level; facilitated exchanges between CoGTA and community leaders; linking the projects to the National Dialogue through Ukuthula, including a first of its kind provincial dialogue with Traditional Leaders, COGTA, a member of the National Dialogue secretariat, and other political actors in the Eastern Cape.

- **Continuity:** Sustaining engagement across multiple phases, recognising that trust cannot be built through single events.
- **Openness to learning:** Remaining genuinely responsive to what emerged from community engagement, allowing new insights to shape the project's direction rather than rigidly following a predetermined plan.
- **Existing Structures Can be Assets, Not Obstacles:** The project deliberately worked through and alongside existing structures such as traditional councils, CPFs, administrative clerks, town halls, local catering businesses, and transport owners. Stakeholders were involved in deciding the content, format, and location of training and dialogue sessions. This increased the relevance and practicality of activities, while strengthening participants' sense of agency and ownership.

What Was Learned

- **The Right Environment Transforms Relationships:** One of the most notable early outcomes was a shift in relationships among stakeholders who had previously been in conflict or disengaged from each other. This was not the result of formal mediation sessions. Instead, it arose from creating conditions conducive to honest conversations: careful one-on-one engagements, active listening, gradual trust-building, transparency, and shared physical presence at a dialogue session. Getting the environment right is fundamental. Without it, a formal process will struggle.
- **A Shared Vision Maintains Momentum:** During the initial dialogue, participants collectively embraced the theme "From a Culture of Violence to a Culture of Peace." This unifying narrative reflected the vision and provided coherence and motivation to the process. Revisiting it at each stage kept stakeholders focused on a common purpose. Local peacebuilding initiatives gain significantly from developing a shared narrative that is meaningful, forward-looking, and owned by the community itself.
- **Genuine Local Ownership Produces Sustainable Results:** Local leadership was visible in the proactiveness of stakeholders, their requests to expand the process to the sub-headmen level, and their integration of learned approaches into their own organisational mandates. The formation of three stakeholder-led peace forums, a coordinating leadership team, and a shared communication channel created structures capable of sustaining momentum beyond the project's life.
- **Sustainability Requires Structural Foundations:** Connections with CoGTA at provincial and national level, along with ongoing coaching and community engagement by the Centre for Mediation in Africa (CMA), have helped embed the initiative within broader governance structures. These linkages are essential for ensuring that locally built capacity does not remain isolated but is recognised and supported by formal institutions.

What Was Learned? A Shared Vision Maintains Momentum

Policy Recommendations

1. Institutionalise Participatory Stakeholder Mapping:

Provincial and municipal entities, including CoGTA and the Department of Social Development, should use digital mapping tools to visualise stakeholder relationships, identify service delivery gaps, and detect emerging conflict zones. Municipalities should allocate dedicated conflict analysis capacity to support early warning and improve coordination.

2. Integrate Co-Created Mediation and Trauma Training into Local Governance:

Community-collaborated training curricula should be formalised within Continuous Professional Development programmes for ward councillors, SAPS sector-policing teams, and traditional council members. Municipal Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) should allocate budgets for annual training cohorts, leveraging partnerships with organisations such as CMA and the Trauma Centre for Survivors of Violence and Torture Trust.

3. Establish and fund multi-level peace forums: National and provincial rural safety strategies should mandate multi-stakeholder forums at district, municipal, and ward levels, chaired by local leaders in partnership with authorities and civil society, with municipal grants covering logistics and supporting community-led peace initiatives.

4. Strengthen Linkages Between Traditional and Formal Institutions:

Policy frameworks should explicitly recognise the conflict resolution roles of traditional leaders and CoGTA Administrative Clerks by strengthening liaison offices within CoGTA provincial departments, supporting Administrative Clerks' offices as coordination centres, and facilitating memoranda of understanding between municipalities and traditional councils that clearly define roles in conflict resolution and service delivery oversight.

5. Shift from episodic to continuous engagement:

Governments and donors should replace short-term, event-driven funding with multi-year, process-oriented, adaptable programmes. Provincial safety clusters should embed process evaluation units for real-time feedback and continuous learning, while funding cycles include provisions for community-led monitoring.



Conclusion

The Ubunye and Ukuthula projects demonstrates that multi-stakeholder, locally grounded peacebuilding is possible and effective in complex environments like Mthatha. When the right relationships are built, existing structures are respected, and communities are genuine partners rather than passive recipients, the conditions for lasting peace begin to take shape. The recommendations above offer a practical way to embed these lessons within governance and funding frameworks to support sustainable, community-owned peace.

The Centre for Mediation in Africa, in the Department of Political Sciences at the University of Pretoria aims to embrace a responsive, transformative, and inclusive understanding of mediation that actively embraces complexity, builds constructive relationships, and leads to a sustainable peace that is owned and lived by all members of society. This policy brief and the Centre for Mediation in Africa's ongoing work with women traditional leaders have been made possible by the funding of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.



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