



The Dynamics of Post-Conflict Reintegration: Experience from Gulu, Jigjiga, and Jos Cities

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Received: 30 April 2024 / Accepted: 21 November 2025
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Abstract

Various forms of conflict and displacement are increasingly shaping urban Africa. Although many studies have focused on the causes and consequences of conflicts, little is known about the urban conflict resilience and re-integration of conflict induced displacements. Situated within the expanding literature on urban peace building, this article explores how people reintegrate and manage the uncertainties caused by conflicts in the urban Africa. Using a qualitative method, it comparatively studied three cities: Jigjiga in Ethiopia, Gulu in Uganda, and Jos in Nigeria. The results show that amidst the emerging urbanization of violence, various forms of social capital play a critical role in mitigating the uncertainty caused by violence and displacement. Religious capital, residence-based, clan and ethnic networks facilitated the integration of migrants, IDPs and refugees and supported them to reintegrate and reclaim lost properties and places faster. Women and youth led vigilantism efforts that served as informal governance mechanisms and community watchdogs have been part of the key tool for the governance of urban conflict. The study shows the growing urbanization of humanitarian and community-based association following the urbanizing conflicts. Although formal government institutions contribute, affected populations tend to place greater trust in their social networks during times of crisis to survive or reintegrate. But some of the existing social capital operated within homogenous groups, fostering bonding rather than bridging across religious and ethnic divides. This led to increased segregation and heightened mistrust among urban residents.

Keywords Conflict governance · Social capital · Urban peace building · Post-conflict re-integration

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Introduction

Conflict remains the number one displacing factor, comprising over 70% of the total causes of displacement in African countries (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2017; IOM, 2021). Most instabilities and conflicts are rooted in the political processes including, election and democratization, representation, land ownership and belonging, economic, and the management of ethnic and religious issues (Beall & Fox, 2011; Büscher, 2018; Cohen, 2009; Elfversson et al., 2023; Goodfellow, 2010; Østby, 2016). There is growing recognition that both conflicts and displacements are rapidly urbanizing (Beall & Fox, 2011; Büscher, 2018; Cilliers, 2020; Østby, 2016; IDMC, (2017)). The analysis of the causes and consequences of conflicts has been the dominant in conflict studies. However, relatively few studies examine the actors and structures of urban conflict governance or the mechanisms that enable successful post-conflict reintegration of displaced populations. Against the claim that the urban settings are ‘divided’ and ‘incapable’ of conflict crisis (Björkdahl, 2013), emerging evidence points to a plurality of mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution (Abadi & Gebremedhin, 2020; Abebe, 2018; Justino, 2012). This study provides empirical evidence on how people cope with and re-integrate in their places and properties in the urban post conflict circumstances in selected cities of Africa, often characterized as conflict hotspots and hosts to large populations of internally displaced persons (IDPs).

People display various degrees of resilience during and in the aftermath of a conflict. There are multiple forms of dealing with uncertainties, “social relations and institutions, and cultural or religious belief systems always, preventively or reactively, provide, or promise to provide some help” in times of conflict and displacement (Benda-Beckmann, 2000). While some individuals manage to minimize risk and recover quickly, others face extreme destruction and the conflict endures. However, these divergent experiences are shaped by a range of factors, which includes the magnitude and duration of the violence, available capacities, the type of coping strategies, and the effectiveness of the coping (Justino, 2012).

In a diversified urban setting, some bodies of literature discuss the positive relationship between [post-]conflict coping capability and the duration of reintegration with the existing social structures (Benda-Beckmann, 2000; Fearon, 2004; Justino, 2012). These structures are increasingly recognized in urban conflict governance (Büscher, 2018). These opportunities could include community self-help networks, in which people themselves and non-state actors play a role in managing conflicts and facilitate post conflict peace building and rehabilitation. While the formal institutions such as the governments and aid organizations play a key role in some cities, informal community-based institutions, mainly youth and women agencies play a bridging or protective role in the post-conflict re-integrative function in many circumstances. These post-conflict recovery mechanisms show not only what (Benda-Beckmann, 2000) denotes as “plurality of normative” [re-]order but also a temporal and spatial dynamism (Benda-Beckmann, 2000; Justino, 2012; Ohiorhenuan, 2011).

To understand the opportunities for urban conflict governance, this paper analyzes post-conflict reintegration processes and the role of multifaceted social structures in facilitating intergroup networking and recovery in three African cities experiencing

significant populations of forcibly displaced peoples (both internally displaced people and forced migrants from neighboring states)—Jigjiga (Ethiopia), Jos (Nigeria) and Gulu (Uganda). In all three countries, the prolonged conflicts and instabilities have been related to the existence of internal wars and rebel groups, such as the Oga-den National Liberation Front (ONLF) in Somali, - Ethiopia, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, and Boko Haram in Nigeria, which are mainly attributed to a lack of inclusive democratization and peaceful political transitions. Ethiopia, the second most populous country in Africa and globally the third in terms of the number of IDPs is characterized by a politicized inter-ethnic and religious divisions and conflicts (IOM, 2022). Since the political transition in 2018, violent conflicts have escalated (Abadi & Gebremedhin, 2020; IOM, 2021; Hagmann & Abdi, 2020). Jigjiga, the capital of Ethiopia's Somali region, is widely perceived as a conflict hotspot and a major destination for migrants (Emmenegger, 2021; Hagmann, 2005; Hagmann & Abdi, 2020). In Nigeria, the most populous African country, inter-group tensions have intensified and in Jos, migrants often live in segregated settlements between host communities and immigrants (Krause, 2011; Nnabuihe & Onwuzuruigbo, 2021). Similarly, in Uganda, there has been a wide range of internal conflicts which displaced dozens of people. For instance, Gulu in Northern Uganda hosts a large number of IDPs, most displaced by the war between the Lord Resistance Army (LRA) and the government. The city also serves as a hub for international migrants from the neighboring countries such as South Sudan, Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, and Democratic Republic of Congo (RVI, 2018).

Methods

The study was conducted in three cities: Jos in Nigeria, Jigjiga in Ethiopia, and Gulu in Uganda. The selection was grounded in their shared status as urban centers deeply affected by prolonged conflict and displacement, yet each offers distinct socio-political and spatial dynamics that enrich comparative analysis. In general, these cases were purposefully selected as urban settings that represent different conflict geographies: Jigjiga (a peripheral and cross-border city), Gulu (a post-conflict and marginalized northern city), and Jos (a centrally located but ethnically and religiously divided urban center). The cities were selected due to their strategically important places, where three of them conceived as an area of hotspots of conflict in the countries. These cities represent diverse trajectories of urban violence ranging from ethno-religious tensions, state-led contestations to transnational displacement. All three have hosted significant populations of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and migrants, making them critical sites for examining urban reintegration processes. Their selection also reflects variation in governance structures, informal coping mechanisms, and the role of social capital, allowing the study to explore how different urban contexts mediate resilience and recovery.

The study employed a comparative qualitative multiple case study design to allow for in-depth exploration of the spatial and contextual dimensions of conflict in three cities. This approach was chosen for its strength in capturing lived experiences and complex social interactions.

The authors co-designed the research methodology and developed similar data collection tools and conducted the fieldwork in the selected case study cities, AT in Jigjiga, GO in Gulu and DA in Jos. Fieldwork was conducted in two phases, three weeks in each phase from June to September 2022. It employed purposive sampling to identify participants with direct knowledge of conflict dynamics, peacebuilding, and recovery processes. About 21 key informants with expertise knowledge in conflict and peace building, including people teaching in universities, experts/advisors working in government and NGOs at national and local level, and IDP focal persons were contacted in the three cities. To gain insights of direct experiences of urban peace restoration processes including post-conflict reintegration, using a purposive and referral sampling, 40 in-depth interviews with residents from multiple groups, considered to include diverse religious and ethnic groups in the case study sites. To substantiate the findings from interviews, six Focus Group Discussions (two in each city) were arranged both with the purposively selected host communities, migrants and the IDPs. Interviews were conducted in Af-Somali and Amharic in Ethiopia, Acholi in Gulu, and Hausa in Jos, recorded, transcribed and then translated to English. Initially verbatim transcription was made in the language in which the interview was conducted, followed by the translation of the transcribed KIIs into English. Then a codebook was prepared by the study team using an inductive approach, where a sample of translated interviews were taken and read line-by-line to develop themes and sub-themes. Coding was then conducted by the research team themselves using Nvivo 14. The analysis followed a thematic and interpretive approach, guided by both inductive coding and theoretical framing, allowing emerging themes to be interpreted in relation to established literature and key issues emerged through inductive coding. Finally, qualitative results were presented and analyzed under each theme in order to address the research questions.

Understanding Reintegration in Urban Peace Building from Below

Peace building research in Africa has been criticized as top down and urban blinded (Bigombe et al., 2000; Björkdahl, 2013; Ohiorhenuan, 2011). Björkdahl (2013) described that peace building theories and practices are imported from the liberal western countries and are ‘state-centric’. However, there has been a growing interest to urbanize the peace building research and theorizing (Björkdahl, 2013). This effort has been motivated by the urbanization of conflicts and the scarcity of urban peace building research. There is a recognition that cities are more likely to become the locus of identity-based conflicts, host diversity and difference and they are susceptible to intense inter-communal often identity-based conflict and violence (Bigombe et al., 2000; Björkdahl, 2013). Localizing the urban peace research in this regard denotes the move to consider the ‘urban’ and its specific socio-cultural and political settings (Björkdahl, 2013).

Urban conflict has been understood as part of social life and so does its coping strategies (Horst & Grabska, 2015). Urban peace building from below, that is, from societal structure perspective has been widely recognized as an alternative conflict analysis approach in many African countries. For instance, (Horst & Grabska, 2015)

rightly claimed that “war is embedded in social life and it is important to understand and analyze these uncertainties as part of life rather than external to it.” Some scholars attribute the maintenance of urban human security through social networks against the risks. Human security in this context refers to the overall wellness and “the protection which a society provides for its members” (Benda-Beckmann, 2000). This approach acknowledges the assessment of societies and their capacities in conflict prevention and peace building (GPPAC et al., 2013; Leaning & Arie, 2000). A specific aspect of this process include post conflict reintegration, which refers to the process and duration through which conflict-induced displaced populations return to their original homes, properties, and communities. This process is not merely physical relocation or coming back to their original place but involves re-establishing social, economic, and spatial belonging. Individuals as members of a society have agencies to maintain their security during conflict/crises and reintegrate faster. This includes peace building measures such as safety from natural and man-made disasters including disease and violent conflicts (Curtis & Dzinesa, 1993), and peace building has, therefore, “deepened to target not only the state and its institutions, but also individuals and their local communities.”

Some reports discuss variations in the success of conflict recovery and reintegration. For example, Akilova et al. (2022) note that the success and speed of reintegration are often contingent on the displaced population’s embeddedness in local networks and institutions, which serve as both entry points and safety nets during recovery. Palacios García et al. (2018) and Proag (2014) also analyzed the interplay of social, political, and economic factors of risks reduction and resilience building during conflicts (Cutter et al., 2012). It denotes variations in proneness of societies to disasters of conflicts (Kuna, 2011). They assess the degree to which a society or a group of people react to the occurrence of an event, such as conflict. This analysis comprises the capacity of people to cope with, recover from the impact of a violent conflict and re-integrate to the original setting faster.

Although the broader definition includes the need to work with and capacitate local non-state actors, the broad range of the existing post conflict interventions, policies and strategies usually focus on the individual capabilities and the formal structure (Ohiorhenuan, 2011). This involves a consideration of “a set of regulatory practices that arise from the interaction and contestation between multiple actors and institutions” (Büscher, 2018). In this context, conflict governance dynamics can be analyzed from a local context, in which people themselves and non-state actors play a role in managing conflicts and facilitate post conflict peace building and rehabilitation. While the formal institutions such as the governments and aid organizations play a key role in some cities, informal community-based institutions, mainly youth and women agencies play a bridging or protective role in the post-conflict re-integrative function in many circumstances. These post-conflict recovery mechanisms show not only what Benda-Beckmann (2000) denotes as “plurality of normative” [re-]order but also a temporal and spatial dynamism (Benda-Beckmann, 2000; Justino, 2012; Ohiorhenuan, 2011).

Specific examples of such social structures being employed in conflict reintegration include verities of social capitals. The term social capital first appeared in the work of Robert D. Putnam in 1990s (Putnam, 1994). It is often associated with trust

and the relationship between people and their networks, to fulfill social, economic, personal, and political interests (Popova, 2009). Putnam understood it as ‘a social organization, such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit’ (Putnam, 1994). Examples of such social fabrics includes village-based and ethnic networks, clan and religious institutions. Religious networks often composed of social capital and this has a unique place in Africa, where religion remains a significant component of social life (McNamee & Muyangwa, 2020).

Finding

Drivers of Urban Conflicts

Political and Governance Factors

The key drivers of urban conflict in the three cities stem from a complex interplay of internal wars, political transitions, ethnic and religious tensions, and large-scale displacement. Jigjiga has been shaped by the legacy of the war between the central government and Somali during the process of state building, the presence of Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and post-2018 political upheavals, making it a hotspot for conflict and migration. Jos is marked by ethno-religious segregation and rising inter-group tensions, exacerbated by the Boko Haram insurgency and influx of refugees from neighboring countries. Gulu, deeply affected by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) conflict, hosts a significant population of internally displaced persons and international migrants from conflict-ridden regions such as South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Across all three cities, politicized ethnic and religious divisions, coupled with the pressures of migration and displacement, have intensified urban vulnerabilities and strained governance and reintegration mechanisms.

State Initiated Conflicts

All cities experienced state sponsored violence, which however takes different forms. Some of the conflicts reported were state-sponsored and manipulated by the political elites. For instance, some political elites manipulate youths and street gangs to incite conflict between ethnic and religious groups to gain their political influence. In Gulu, there were evidences where some local government officials work with street gangs towards attaining political and economic networks. A respondent in this regard noted that *“the government officials use those street kids to work with them.”* In Jigjiga, the local government organized a youth group, locally named *“Hego”*, equipped them and commanded them to attack non-Somali groups in the city and the surrounding and their properties and institutions such as churches. The para-militia, and the youth group both allies of the former regional President Abdi Mohamoud Omar, instigated ethnic and religious conflict using this force, to revert the political change in the 2018 in Ethiopia. Similarly, a key informant from Jos city (KII-JOS-MK) illustrated that there were occasions when *“politicians manipulate societal groups to win votes.”*

The Influence of Location

The conflicts in the study cities have also been influenced by the geographic location of the cities themselves. The case study cities located in border areas, which made them a hub for internal and international migrants. For instance, Jigjiga's proximity to the border area (to Somalia/Somaliland) facilitated the influx of Somalia in-migrants and the out migration of thousands of Ethiopian youths to the Middle East route, making Jigjiga a transit point. The city has been perceived as an ideal place in recent years with multiple opportunities including high wage price and its location to the border areas opening opportunities for the migrants to move abroad. Jos located in the centre of the country, with a long history of peace. This peaceful historical flagship encouraged migrants from the predominant Muslims North and Migrants from the predominant Christians south of Nigeria into the city that is already predominant Christian. Our respondents mentioned the influence of the contestations over the city and the power dynamics between Hausa Muslims and indigenous Christians as an enduring instability and conflict. Similarly, the location of Gulu at the junction of the northern Uganda, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, historically facilitated the influx of international migrants, and this has been a source of resource-based conflicts (RVI, 2018).

The Influence of Administrative Status

The administrative status of the cities and the resultant socio-economic and cultural dynamics has been reported to be one of the key factors of the emerging competitive actors. With the promotion of the city status, there was a contestation over who should own and administer the cities. This is a key issue for the emerging intergroup conflicts in the three case study cities. For instance, the elevation of Gulu to city status in Uganda has attracted large number of migrants. In Jos, the status of a capital city had been so since 1967 as the capital of the then Benue Plateau state and this along with pre-independence tin mining opportunities accounted for the early migration narrative. The shift of Somali regional capital from Gode to Jigjiga (the city previously dominated by non-Somali, mainly military personnel) led to the influx of Somalis and this has increased the tension between the Somali and non-Somalis. It attracted many Somalis to Jigjiga both from abroad and the surrounding rural areas. The historical memory of the war between the Somali and the Ethiopian Christian highland regimes in the pre-1991 period and the perceived dominance of the non-Somali and the exclusions of the Somalis in the past sharpened intergroup interaction. This increasing tensions broke out to open conflicts in 2017/18.

With the elevation of Gulu to city status, *“there were wrangles for political spaces coming up, then on economic basis and people are struggling for political positions in the city.”* This process brings a cultural conflict with the natives. *“The status/identity of the Acholi tend to be a problem with the new culture of urbanization where people live in town”* (AOI_GI_07). Respondents in this regard mentioned religious and ethnic urbanization and the resultant administrative and change in social interaction. An informant in Gulu City described that the emergence of religious groups, founded by migrants. Pentecostal churches, for example, are on the rise, and the tough competi-

tion between newly emerging religious institutions and the existing ones has been creating tensions in urban areas arising from expanding their own religious followers. Religious and ethnic diversity in the context of unresponsive and incapable local governments in provision of basic necessities have posed mistrust, violence and conflicts in urban areas. A key informant in Jos also highlights how the emergence of religious diversity, when not accompanied by inclusive and trust-building mechanisms, can become a source of social tension and insecurity. There were “*growing mistrust and insecurity because you don’t know who is who*” KII-JOS-DG).

There have also been fierce claims and counter claims over the cities as the core of the conflict in Jos. There has been the politics of ownership of certain urban places between indigenes and settlers (Chidozie, 2016). There are complications arising from the fact that the Northern region of Nigeria comprises of a huge Hausa-Fulani Ethnic group, who are predominantly Muslims while the southern region comprises mainly Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups, who are mainly Christians (Krause, 2011; Nnabuihe & Onwuzuruigbo, 2021), and a Jos and Plateau state that is predominately Christian non-Hausa – Fulani northern group. In this context, there has been fierce competition between the diverse religious and ethnic groups in Jos along native-settler narrative.

Conflict Governance and Post-Conflict Reintegration Mechanisms from Below

Religious and community-based social capital provide a key preventive and post-conflict re-integration role. This section discusses a multitude of social capabilities such as religious, ethnic and clan networks, youth and women associations as an opportunities of the governance of urban conflicts. A plurality of actors have been involved in the post conflict resolution and peace building in the three cities. These actors comprise prominent individuals and institutions ranging from non-governmental and governmental organization, humanitarian agencies and religious associations. The rapid reintegration of IDPs was attributed to the existence of a variety of mechanisms, ranging from state initiated organizations and NGOs to community-based self-help institutions. Our study participants narrated the important role of indigenous and community-based institutions in conflict governance. It is clearly evident that in the context of non-existent and weak formal institutions such as government or NGO support, which are characterized by distrust, irregularity and inadequacy, people’s social networks have facilitated to reintegrate fast[er] and back in their possession. The case of Jos is worth noting, where integration have been facilitated by the network of friends, relations and ethnic/religious acquaintances.

Youth and Women Vigilantism in Jos

State initiated youth and women groups have been crucial in the governance of urban conflicts, often in close cooperation with the urban government. The role played by youth vigilantes were widely reported in Jos. Youths organized into a vigilante group to support policing and the mobilization of communities for peace building. There were various youth wings in the city who played a watchdog role. These include neighborhood watch, women wing vigilante group, youth led peace platform (YPP),

and Rikkos Youth Central Forum. Rikkos Youth Central Forum played a coordination role where they mobilize all youths towards creating awareness and sensitization on peace building. The Youth led peace platform were responsible for giving early warning signals and report to the government security wing. These associations were established by the youth themselves and operate independently although there was an assertion that the government officials are co-opting them.

In Dadin-Kowa area of Jos, there is the Youth Parliament, which composed of all youth members in all neighborhood. The neighborhood is segmented along existing/organized streets and from each street, five youths are recruited to form a sub-group and a leader nominated to be contacted in case of any emergency. A Focused Group Discussion (FGD) Participant mentioned that there were 200 youths who formed an association, and any issue of conflict in any part of the area is first reported to their executives. This association have a strong network that enables them to easily identify perpetrators of any conflict and report to the police.

Women have been actively engaged in peace building and conflict prevention through neighborhood watchdog. In Jos, a group of women formed an association, “*Zaman Tare*”, engaged in giving the early warnings of conflicts, particularly in the hotspot areas. The association works collaboratively with the youth vigilante group, mainly street representatives. A key informant mentioned that “*issues of conflict in the neighborhood involving a woman is referred to the women group to be resolved which in most cases they resolved amicably in their own way*” (KII_JOS_DG). This account highlights how women’s groups serve as frontline mediators and peace builders at neighborhood-level.

A Protective and Bridging Role of Religious Social Capital

Religious organisations have been the key source of reliance during a conflict-induced crisis in the three cities, which, however, provides different functions. While it provided a protective function in Jigjiga, it played a bridging role in Gulu and Jos. During the 2018 violence in Jigjiga, religious organizations provided protection for victims of violence. Religious leaders and organizations play a protection and preventive role by convening community, dialogue, problem-solving workshops, and training in conflict resolution skills. An Orthodox religious leader explained that St. Michael Church in Jigjiga has provided protection and facilitated reintegration during the 2018 conflict.

“The IDPs came to the church compound and received protection regardless of ethnic and religious difference. We closed church services for about 10 days in order to provide comfort to them. All these used the church compound, store, church’s elementary school and they also used the church’s cemetery. We provided them food and clothes for a month.” (WP3_IDI_Religious leader).

As noted in the excerpt, we see an affirmation that the protective role of religious institutions go beyond their religious identities. It indicates that religion bridges political divisions and conflicts. The people who got protection in the church compound were victims of political conflicts, although they belonged to different religions. In

this case the church provided a protection for people belonging to different ethnic groups regardless of the religious divide.

In Jos, religious institutions play a bridging role, bringing together people divided along ethnic and religious lines. Mosques and churches facilitated the integration between the IDPs or international migrants and the host communities. A key informant in Jos described religion as “a common denominator”. For instance, “*IDPs and international migrants from Mali and Sierra Leon are integrated into the community through religious practices*”, participating in various religious practices, and this further facilitated economic integration (KII_JOS_RK).

The religious networks also facilitated the deepening of enduring social networks such as inter-group marriage. For example, another key informant (KII_JOS_GL) also mentioned that there were cases of marriage between the IDPs and the host communities due to religious similarities.

Religious leaders have also been playing a key role in facilitating conflict resolution and reintegration processes in the three cities. For example, in Gulu and Jigjiga, religious leaders have formed a council, representing major religious institutions in the cities, which include Muslims and Christians. In Gulu, Acholi Religious Leaders’ Peace Initiative is an inter-denominational religious network, where different prominent religious leaders come together and form an initiative to mobilize the community and engaged in peace advocacy and training. An informant viewed this institution as “*a wonderful tool for peace building*”. They bridge government and communities, organize workshops, conferences or seminars, where these religious leaders are brought together to emphasize the importance of peace because they are an organ for creating harmony within people. Religious organisations are always known to be the opium of the masses.

Interreligious Council of Ethiopia Somali Regional Office was one of the bridging institutions operating in the region. The Interreligious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) was established in 2010 with the aim of promoting interreligious harmony by bringing together all faiths to address issues of social inclusion. The council comprises representatives from Orthodox Christians, Muslims, and Protestants. During and in the aftermath of the 2018 conflict, the council collaborated with clan representatives and the local government which facilitated the calming of the conflict, reintegrated and repossessed the victims in Jigjiga.

Clanship

Clan systems have been dominant institutions practiced by the Somalis, was reported as the main facilitator of reintegration. These institutions provide protection to the communities in times of risks of different forms including droughts and conflict-induced displacements. Though clan strongholds are dominant in rural area, our respondents witnessed their existence and visible function in urban setting during the 2018 conflict in the region (Jigjiga_KII_IMS). Some of the IDPs rely on their relatives living in the nearby districts. A key informant from the Somalia Region Social Affairs Office (Jigjiga_KII_SAB) reported that the displaced people flee to their loved ones to survive droughts and conflicts.

People in the study area have a tradition of cooperation at the time of crisis through kinship and clans. The clan's role has been highly acknowledged by the people and the government and plays a key role as a host for its displaced members and in conflict resolution. The informant (Jigjiga_KII_SAB) mentioned that in every section of the city, there are clan leaders and the representative of all clans (Garaad) in Jigjiga. They collaborate with kebele leaders and have identified and registered all people affected by the conflict and helped compensation payment processes. The widespread presence of clan representatives and their immediate responsiveness to disputes reflects a deeply embedded system of customary authority that commands legitimacy and trust among the local population. The reference to "*everywhere they have branches*" suggests a decentralized yet cohesive network of traditional governance that mirrors, and in some cases surpasses the reach of formal institutions (Jigjiga_KII_SAB). The respondent also mentioned the coexistence of formal and indigenous institutions, where government sometimes relies on clan elders to mediate disputes, which indicates a hybrid governance arrangement, where state actors recognize the practical efficacy and cultural legitimacy of traditional mechanisms. Moreover, the assertion that "*you cannot be out of clan control*" (Jigjiga_KII_SAB) reveals the pervasive influence of clan identity, which shows that social embeddedness in clan structures is a prerequisite for navigating justice and conflict resolution, reinforcing the normative power of customary systems. The influential power of clan leaders emerges not only from the social, but also from the economic point of view. Clan leaders are expected to have economic power to treat people fairly. Hence, the 2018 resolution and post-conflict reintegration process was facilitated mainly by the presence of clan leaders. The respondents believed that the conflict could not have been resolved if they did not intervene.

Council of tribal representatives have also been evident in Dadin - Kowa of Jos where it facilitated conflict resolution and reintegration processes. An informant said, "*all tribal groups have leaders and there is an avenue for them where they meet occasionally to discuss peace. It is made up of all the communities that are in Dadin-Kowa, Yorubas, Igbos, Hausa, and Uhrobos.*" During conflict, people usually trust and rely on their own tribes. There was an evidence in the case studies where the local governments and their partners use and collaborate with these tribal institutions to manage conflicts. Their involvement ensures that peace initiatives are not only top-down directives but are socially resonant and widely disseminated through trusted interpersonal networks (KII-JOS-COM). This insight also underscores the plurality of civil society actors. This approach leverages the social capital and its legitimacy in conflict resolution and post conflict reintegration.

Economic Ties

It was evident that the existence of economic interdependence created through specialization and diversification has facilitated the reintegration processes. The data from Jos illustrated that the special skills that the migrants possess special skills such as mining and fashion design help them to integrate with host community (KII-JOS-

COM). In Jigjiga, the post-2018 conflict re-integration was due to the existence of strong economic interdependence between the Somalis, widely understood as the lowland pastoralists, and the surrounding highland Oromo agriculturalists. The key informant (Jigjiga_KII_IMS) illustrated, for example, the role played by Khat production and high dependence in its consumption. He further elaborated the interdependence as: *“The highlanders [Oromo] bring items such as chats, potatoes, tomatoes, and onions; and the low land [Somali] brings contraband products like sugar, rice, spaghetti, clothes, etc., cheaply from abroad”* (Jigjiga_KII_IMS).

The same respondent further elucidated that in the time of the conflict both people faced difficulties to survive due to the obstruction of flow of these exchangeable products and this necessitated the commencement of peace restoration process. These large-scale economic ties have led the Oromo and Somalis to trust each other and even see themselves as “unable to survive without each other” (Jigjiga_KII_BM).

Indigenous Self-Help Institutions in Jigjiga

Experiences in Jigjiga indicate that there are indigenous institutions established on the basis of place of origin and vicinity which provided a recovery mechanism for the 2018 conflict in the city. These institutions include idder, ekub and business networks, which were usually established and practiced by the non-indigenes who were the victims of the conflict. The study participants mentioned that although the main purpose of these institutions were to help their members in times of personalized pleasure and sorrow, these days, they are beginning to consider conflict related crisis.

Idder is an association made up by a group of persons united by friendship, vicinity, jobs, or place of origin, and has an objective of providing mutual aid to one another in times of sorrow or pleasure (Tufa, 2018). It was an institution that offered a mechanism for reintegration and recovery from conflicts. There are many idders in Jigjiga mainly practiced by non-Somali groups. For some of the victims of conflicts, these institutions provide compensation for properties damaged during conflict, and believed this facilitated their recovery processes. For example, Yehulum idder provides health insurance for their members. The idder also support people if they face different crisis such as displacement. The head of idder said that “idders used to focus on providing burial support services, but they have now expanded their services to development and conflict crisis management. As a result, many indigenous institutions, such as Idder, have been transformed in response to the contemporary crisis related to the conflict.

The study participants also mentioned Ikub as an institution which facilitates their recovery, mainly for economic reintegration. It is an institution where people contribute some amount of money weekly or monthly to receive a large sum at some point in a cycle. It is practiced by friends, colleagues, professional groups, and neighbors. Some respondents considered this a risk minimization on which they can rely on at the time of conflict. A respondent in this regard said, *“even if these social insurance is not there, can government manage millions of IDPs in the country?”* (Jigjiga_KII_TNG).

Discussion

This study contributes to the growing literature on urban conflicts and displacement by emphasizing the concept of post conflict reintegration. It explores how conflict-affected urban population in African cities reintegrate faster through localized governance practices and indigenous means of social capital. The paper discusses four interrelated themes emerging from the findings i.e.: state-initiated conflicts, the influence of location, grassroots governance practices, and varieties of social capital as factors of reintegration.

The findings affirm that many urban conflicts are not merely spontaneous or community-driven but are deeply embedded in state-led political processes. In all the three cities, Jigjiga, Jos, and Gulu, conflict trajectories were shaped by exclusionary governance, politicized religion and ethnicity. This aligns with Østby (2016) and Goodfellow (2010), who argued that urban violence in Africa often stems from struggles over representation, land, and belonging, exacerbated by weak or partisan state institutions. In Jigjiga, for instance, the legacy of the Ogaden conflict and the securitization of the Somali region reflect what Hagmann and Abdi (2020) described as the “politics of suspicion,” where the state’s role in conflict is both direct and structural. Moreover, religious identities in many countries in Africa are often instrumentalised by political actors seeking to advance personal or partisan agendas. In many cases, religion becomes a proxy through which deeper political, ethnic, or territorial disputes are expressed. A salient example is the 2018 conflict in Jigjiga, which was widely portrayed by the study participants as politically incited rather than rooted in genuine theological or interfaith divisions. The targeting of churches and religious institutions during the unrest served as symbolic acts intended to provoke communal outrage and reinforce narratives of division. This finding affirms Østby (2016) and Hagmann and Abdi (2020) claim that identity-based conflicts in Ethiopia are often orchestrated through politicized narratives of belonging and exclusion.

It is equally important to examine the relationship between key actors in the reintegration process, particularly the interactions between community-based institutions and local government structures. The study found that some of the community-based associations such as women and youth vigilante group were government initiated. Clan and religious associations were reported to be supported by the government. In this regard, the relationship between the community-based institutions and local governments was described as cooperative yet strategically co-optive, reflecting what Büscher (2018) terms a “plurality of governance.”

The study also found that conflicts are not only influenced by political and socio-economic factors, but also understanding location is vital. The concept of location here interpreted as a factor of conflict dynamics related to geographic marginality, socio-demographic and border dynamics. In this regard, conflicts in the three cities, Jigjiga, Gulu, and Jos, were not merely political and economic, but also influenced by location factor, being peripheral, cross-border, and central. For instance, Jigjiga’s proximity to the Somali border and its peripheral position within Ethiopia made it vulnerable to cross-border influences and identity contestations. Gulu’s his-

torical marginality within northern Uganda, combined with its socio-demographic dynamics, fueled long-standing tensions between the region and the central state. Meanwhile, Jos, located at the crossroads of Nigeria's ethno-religious fault lines, experienced recurrent violence linked to its central position and demographic diversity. Location analysis also entails neighborhood composition and settlement, which shapes access to resources, safety, and social networks. For instance, in Jos and Jigjiga, migrants and IDPs are often confined to segregated settlements. This spatial segregation aligns with what Büscher's (2018) argument of spatialised nature of vulnerability and resilience.

Despite the limitations of the formal local government due to its marginality, the study reveals a vibrant landscape of grassroots governance and fabrics of resilience and reintegration. Women and youth-led vigilantism and neighborhood watch groups were actively utilized as conflict prevention in Jos. In Jigjiga and Gulu, such practices often operate parallel to or in negotiation with state actors, reflecting what Abadi and Gebremedhin (2020) describe as a "plurality of governance." These practices resonate with Justino's (2012) notion of "civic resilience," where communities develop endogenous responses to insecurity.

Religious and clan networks emerged as both protective and integrative forces across the three cities. In contexts where ethnic and political affiliations are sources of division, religious social capital provided a relatively neutral platform for trust-building and collective humanitarian action. This dual role, bonding within communities and bridging across divides echoes Benda-Beckmann's (2000) conceptualization of normative pluralism and Fearon's (2004) emphasis on the role of social institutions in post-conflict recovery. In Jos and Jigjiga, interfaith dialogue initiatives helped mitigate sectarian tensions and facilitated post conflict reintegration, while in Gulu, churches facilitated psychosocial support and land mediation.

Economic interdependence emerged as a significant facilitator of post-conflict reintegration across the three cities studied. Everyday economic transactions created a powerful incentives for coexistence. In Jigjiga, for instance, commodity exchanges and trade networks enabled displaced populations to reintegrate faster, often bridging divides that political discourse had hardened. Similarly, in Jos, informal labor arrangements and mutual reliance in petty trade fostered pragmatic relationships between host communities and migrants, even in spatially segregated neighborhoods. In Gulu, post-conflict reconstruction efforts and the expansion of small-scale businesses provided opportunities for returnees and former IDPs to rebuild livelihoods alongside long-term residents. In Jigjiga, community-based self-help groups played key role in post conflict recovery. In the aftermath of the 2018 conflict, traditional mutual aid institutions such as *Idder* and *Ikub* have played a vital role in facilitating reintegration and recovery among displaced populations. The study uniquely found that these indigenous institutions are transforming themselves from social and economic function (*Idder* as a burial and solidarity association and *Ikub* as a rotating savings and credit scheme) to conflict response mechanisms. In this regard, this finding can expand the concept of economic survival strategies (Justino, 2012).

Conclusion

Urban conflicts in Africa are on the rise, and the continent is experiencing new forms of displacements and human rights abuses. Urban instability is closely tied to broader national socio-political dynamics, such as political injustice and inequalities, which create conditions for the proliferation of armed groups such as ONLF, LRA, and Boko Haram. Many conflicts in the cities stem from contested claims to inclusive urban governance, city ownership, and belonging, mainly manifesting as between native and migrant narrative. The large influx of migrants and the marginalization of the indigenes on one hand, and the struggle of the migrants to access the scarce urban services on the other hand have intensified social fragmentation and contributed to the securitization of urban spaces.

Amidst the rising trends of conflict-induced displacements, Africa is rich with socio-cultural traditions that offer resilience against multiple forms of urban uncertainties, ranging from individual capabilities to social capitals rooted in economic, clan, ethnic and religious entities. The IDPs utilized varieties group bonding social capital such as intra-clan, intra-ethnic and intra-religious associations to protect themselves during violent conflicts while there were some evidences of bridging social capital including council of religions, elders and youths, which played a key role in IDPs reintegration and peace restoration processes. A particular form of social capital showed a dynamism, a move from individualized self-help towards conflict crisis management, this has been evidenced by the transformation of community-based self-help institutions into platforms for humanitarian response and recovery. For instance, the people in Jigjiga have utilized economic, religious, and residence-based institutions such as idder and ikub not only for religious or economic services but also to survive during the conflict and reintegrate back to their possession and daily life after the conflict. Similarly, the religious institutions have facilitated the peace restoration processes and the integration of migrants to the host communities in Gulu and Jos. The level of risk and the duration of reintegration and repossession were shaped by the level of economic interdependence and the existence of social grouping such as religious and village-based rather than individual capabilities. Above all, the study found that religion has been the dominant form of social capital in Africa, where religiously practices are deeply embedded in everyday lives of the people.

The role of local government in conflict reintegration processes was evident in all the three cities, either through co-optation or cooperation with the non-state actors such as religious and community-based associations. There were active government initiated youth and women associations playing a significant role in conflict prevention through policing and watchdog roles in Jos while NGOs and faith-based organizations played a key role in conflict governance in Gulu. Religious social capital played a protective role in Jigjiga, while bridging native-migrant divide in Gulu, which facilitated the integration of the migrants. Hence, diverse forms of social capital were positively associated with resilience and successful post-conflict reintegration. This study highlights the need to promote bridging networks and capacitate the local government towards inclusive means of migration and social diversity governance.

Author Contributions All authors contributed to the study conception and design. All authors participated in data collection, transcription and translation. AAT analyzed data, prepare draft manuscript, and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding This research was conducted as part of the Migration, Urbanisation and Conflict in Africa (MUCA) project, supported by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) through the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA), under grant number ES/T01542X/1.

Declarations

Ethical standards This research complies with the ethical standards of the institutional approval. Supporting letters were received from the research implementing agency, Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS), Addis Ababa University, University of Gulu, and University of Jos. No studies involving human participants or animals were conducted by the authors. Informed consent was not required for this study.

Conflict of interests The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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