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OPINION AND ANALYSIS

Mediation is not mystical work: the need to professionalise the AU's mediation processes

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IS MEDIATION a specialized means for diplomatically resolving conflict or is it a matter of guess work? In Africa, through the African Union (AU), mediation has not been viewed as a specialized method that requires professionalism and expertise. In many cases mediation tasks are assigned to former African heads of state to undertake, without due regard to their mediation professionalism and experience. It follows, then, that instead of helping parties find mutual political agreement that would lead to sustainable peace these rulers either gloss over the root causes of the conflict and leave it unresolved or, in extreme cases, exacerbate it.

Other than having been sitting former heads of state and government, African mediators lack mediation capacity and therefore, cannot provide professional mediation assistance to parties in a conflict. The O/AU sponsored mediation process in Burundi is a case in point. It started immediately after the conflict erupted in 1993. However, due to lack of professional and expert mediators the process took almost 15 years and saw multiple mediators trying to resolve the conflict. It is horrifying that many people died as a result of the protracted process.

Amy L. Smith and David R. Smock in their report *on Managing a Mediation Process*, highlight that mediation involves the process of assessing a conflict. By and large, the process of conflict assessment in itself requires expertise and professionalism. It is critical to understand that this assessment involves different activities. The two scholars note that this process involves four main activities: understanding what the conflict is about; understanding who the actors are; understanding the larger context, and understanding sources of power and leverage. This requires professionalism, not the influential position of a former head of state.

Arguably many former heads of state have no expertise in what the conflict is about. They fail to understand issues embedded in conflict, the issues which led to the open fighting. These rulers, in

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Mediation is not mystical work

the main, also often lack the detailed understanding of the actors involved in the conflict. In African conflicts, actors are not necessarily those who are involved in open fighting, but also the diaspora. By diaspora I mean scattered people with a common origin. They include refugees abroad, the exiled elites and politicians. Actors in the conflict may also include regional leaders and the international community. Former heads of state do not always understand the local mechanism of conflict resolution either. They are not able to understand the political history of the country in which violent conflict is occurring. These deficiencies make it impossible for them to quickly and competently grasp the larger context of a conflict.

Professional mediation should address all the characteristics of intractability and root causes of the conflict. This is the reason why AU mediation processes lacks autonomy and ownership. The AU mediation team adopts treaties and peace agreements originating outside the continent and imposes them on the African people. While these peace agreements may satisfy politicians' power and economic ends, they do not resonate with the aspirations and wellbeing of the populace and the diaspora. Indeed, the late president of Tanzania Julius Nyerere, when facilitating mediation process in Burundi, conceded that he was incapable of understanding the relative power of disputants and the conflicts fluidity.

Non-professional mediators lack skills and expertise that could help them assess and enhance conflict 'ripeness', and persuade parties to consider mediation as key to unlocking political deadlock. In the case of Burundi, Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim former OAU chairperson, Ambassador Fall, Ambassador Leandre Bassole, and the late president of Tanzania Julius Nyerere as mediators lacked the expertise necessary to take parties towards considering mediation as a way out of the stalemate. Here it became a case of the tail wagging the dog since the parties persuaded mediators, and so instead of mediators helping the parties they became a problem. Their presence hampered and complicated the entire mediation process. The Darfur mediation process is another text book case of a gung ho approach to mediation by the AU. The process continues to be hampered by the failure to understand that mediation is a specialized work.

In view of the above, the AU mediation architecture that relies on either a sitting or former heads of state is devoid of professional mediation. Currently the appointment of mediators at the AU leans heavily towards the political position an individual held in the past or is currently holding. The success of a mediation process, however, is not dependent on the influential position but rather the expertise that a mediator commands. It is unfortunate that mediation continues to be viewed as guesswork in Africa and this is the reason why no attention has been paid to training and nurturing of professional African mediators. Remarkably, the organization continues to lack coherent policies and principles that should guide a mediation team. It is the same mentality that accounts for a propensity to appoint career politicians into the diplomatic corps in African polities.

Mediation is a specialized endeavor that requires professionalism and expertise. Any AU mediation team must understand that mediation is not a mystical attempt at intervention but a specialized activity that needs preparation, training and nurturing of African mediators rather than merely the recruiting of former heads of state who know little about the mediation process.

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