A participatory approach to peacebuilding evaluation in Seke district, Zimbabwe

Norman Chivasa

Abstract
Mainstream monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of peacebuilding tends to be mainly practitioner-oriented, while under-reporting initiatives by ordinary people who develop an interest to learn from their own practice. This study aims to fill this gap, by reporting the evaluation of a self-initiated peace committee by ordinary people in the Seke district, Zimbabwe. The study revealed that local communities currently possess the propensity to work as a collective with shared experiences and perceptions, and the linkages between these attributes and participatory peacebuilding initiatives are natural. Furthermore, it emerged that action research can be a useful methodology, with the potential to create space for ordinary people to participate in the design, implementation, M & E of peace initiatives in their villages. Although this study examined the role of self-initiative monitoring and evaluation destined to become an alternative to technocratic M & E, it acknowledges the value of top-down M & E of peacebuilding and does not seek to replace them, rather, to bring bottom-up M & E practices into the mainstream M &E of peacebuilding using local initiatives as a vehicle to create a greater impact on peacebuilding interventions.

Key words: action research, evaluation, participatory peacebuilding, Zimbabwe

Un enfoque participativo para la evaluación de la construcción de la paz en el distrito de Seke, Zimbabue

Resumen
El monitoreo y la evaluación *mainstream* (M&E) de la construcción de la paz tienden a estar principalmente orientados a los profesionales, mientras que no se reportan las iniciativas de las personas comunes que presentan un interés por aprender de sus propias prácticas. Este estudio tiene como objetivo llenar este vacío al informar la evaluación de un comité de paz auto-iniciado por personas comunes en el distrito de Seke, Zimbabue. El estudio reveló que las comunidades locales poseen actualmente la propensión a trabajar como un colectivo con experiencias y percepciones compartidas, y los vínculos entre estos atributos y las iniciativas participativas de construcción de la paz son naturales. Además, surgió que la investigación- acción puede ser una metodología útil con el potencial de crear un espacio para que la gente común participe en el diseño, implementación, monitoreo y evaluación de iniciativas de paz en sus aldeas. Aunque este estudio examinó el papel del monitoreo y la evaluación por iniciativa propia destinados a convertirse en una alternativa al

monitoreo y evaluación tecnocráticos, reconoce el valor de M&E de arriba hacia abajo para la construcción de la paz y no busca reemplazarlos, más bien, busca llevar las prácticas de M&E de abajo hacia arriba dentro del M&E *mainstream* de la construcción de la paz utilizando iniciativas locales como vehículo para crear un mayor impacto sobre intervenciones de construcción de la paz.

Palabras clave: investigación-acción, evaluación, construcción de la paz participativa, Zinbabue.

Introduction

Research that emphasises the participatory nature of action research (AR) is increasingly gathering momentum within mainstream peacebuilding discourses. This follows a surge of interest to employ AR as a strategy to address peace and development challenges in post-conflict societies in the 1990s by international donor communities, peace researchers and practitioners. A case in point was the War-torn Societies project (WSP) which tested the potential of AR in rebuilding the socio-economic, political and cultural challenges in four different countries namely; Eritrea, Mozambique, Guatemala and Northeast Somalia between 1994 and 1998. In these conflict-ravaged societies, the participatory nature of AR was employed to ensure local ownership between different actors involved in rebuilding socio-economic and political institutions (Fagen 1995; Farah et al. 1998; Johannsen 2001; Stiefel 2001). As Johannsen (2001, p. 2) asserts, AR was implemented "in order to render academic research more applicable to the needs of those being studied, and encourage them to actively participate in the research design, methodology and projected outcome." As a scientific method, AR has the potential to assist research participants to better understand problems affecting them and generate solutions to those problems. By implication, scientific methods are seen as a reliable guide towards informed and effective action (Lisa 1984). Consequently, academics and practitioners consider AR as a strategy that brings together different actors involved in addressing peace and development challenges (Johannsen 2001). It is also considered a useful strategy to address immediate and practical problems with a view to contribute to theory and knowledge and to improve practice (Lisa 1984).

The study is framed within discourses on monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of peacebuilding initiatives and participatory M&E practices (impact assessment) (Koltzow 2013). M&E of peacebuilding initiatives continues to suffer from a myriad of challenges resulting from contentions over evidence on the impact of peace interventions. To be specific, the greatest challenge is that peace is a non-linear process, and it defies replicable and verifiable measurements because of its fluidity (Church 2008; Koltzow 2013; Menkhaus 2004). However, while M & E discourses are focusing on elitist/technocratic (standardised) evaluation models of measuring peace (Paffenholz 2011; (OECD) Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2012; Andersen & Kennedy-Chouane 2014), the current study focused on bottom-up evaluation by ordinary people who developed an interest in evaluating their own peace initiatives. In M & E of peacebuilding, what has not received academic attention is the involvement of ordinary people who developed an interest to use scientific methods to evaluate their own initiatives. The aim of this study was to address the identified gap, by reporting on evaluation activities conducted by ordinary people through the AR framework to determine the outcome of a peace committee in ward 8 of Seke district, Zimbabwe.

In addition to the above, the article referred to 2014 collaboration and partnerships between 14 ordinary people and a researcher in ward 8 of Seke district, that led to the creation of a ward peace committee (WPC) by using the four step participatory process of AR namely, problem identification, planning, taking action and evaluation (Coghlan & Brannick 2014). The article reports the subsequent self-evaluation process by WPC with a goal to contribute to M&E on peacebuilding discourses, which do not make provision for evaluation of initiatives by ordinary people who developed an interest to learn from their own practice through the use of scientific methods. The self-evaluation activities by members of the WPC illuminated the writing of this article.

Background and study locale

Seke is one of nine districts in Mashonaland East province, Zimbabwe. It comprises 21 wards consisting of 8 communal and 13 commercial areas. Crop production is the primary means of livelihood in Seke district. As at 2015, the average poverty prevalence in all 21 wards stood at 56% (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF 2015).

Ward 8 is a communal area, which largely relies on subsistence crops and livestock farming. Crops include maize, groundnuts, sweet potatoes, small grains (such as millet), cow peas and beans, while livestock includes traditional chickens, goats and cattle. Proximity to Harare and Chitungwiza agricultural markets has propelled market gardening involving crops such as tomatoes, onions and other vegetables grown as cash crops providing livelihoods for households. To supplement their livelihoods, some sections of rural people in ward 8 have adopted village savings and loan associations (VSLA) scheme (Chivasa 2015).

A previous study by Chivasa (2015) outlined some of the conflict issues bedeviling residents in ward 8 as the impetus behind the creation of the WPC. The conflict issues singled out in Chivasa's report include among others, hunger and food insecurity at households level, unavailability of finances to pay school fees, rape cases involving girl children, domestic violence, stock theft, robber, fist fighting at beer parties and disputes over land boundaries. Accordingly, peacebuilding is understood in ward 8 of Seke district as a process involving the building of relationships, trust between individuals and groups, prevention of small scale violence (such as fist fighting, intimate partner violence), prevention of conflict and its resolution and coming up with modalities to improve livelihoods of individuals and groups at household level (Chivasa 2015). It is against this background that a peace committee was envisaged as a peacebuilding mechanism, that provided the inhabitants with a platform to take responsibility for their own peace and development aspirations.

Literature Review

In peacebuilding discourses, a new surge of participatory and community-driven peacebuilding endeavors known as participatory peacebuilding has emerged (Nascimento, Keeler & Jacobs 2004). The emergence of participatory peacebuilding initiatives is linked to local ownership discourses in development theory, which emerged against the background of domination by

developed countries over the developing world (Shinoda 2008). Local ownership discourses took prominence in the early 1990s among development aid agencies (Saxby 2003). In development theory and practice, local ownership has always been understood as involving four different dynamics. Firstly, ordinary people taking responsibility for their own development aspirations. Second, recipient ordinary people owning and implementing development initiatives. Third, ordinary people participating in decision making processes and fourth, ordinary people having the right to self-determination (Lavergne 2003; Saxby 2003). Viewed from a peacebuilding perspective, the non-participation of ordinary people was perceived to be one of the recipes for failed peacebuilding.

In the above context, during 2001, the concept of local ownership was integrated into peacebuilding theory by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) of February 2001 (para. 10-12). The UNSC perceived local ownership to be one of the preconditions for sustainable peace (cited in Bojicic-Dzelilovic & Martin 2016; Demir 2017). This integration of local ownership culminated in local ownership in peacebuilding. Since then, the concept of local ownership in peacebuilding has been subjected to scholarly evaluation and assessments.

Richmond (2009) understood local ownership in peacebuilding as 'everyday forms of peace' arguing that peace is not found in institutions but in everyday interactions, informal relationships of individuals and groups. This is so because peace is a local construct that represents the needs, preferences and aspirations of people within a local context (Richmond 2014). MacGinty (2013) contends that local forms of peace represent the on-ground conditions and practices by which people sustain and promote peace. Peace is part of everyday life of people, and for that reason it is constructed in the vernacular (Funk & Said 2010).

Ojendaal, Leornadso & Lundquist (2017) view local ownership in peacebuilding as the local turn. In the local turn discourses on peacebuilding, emphasis has been placed on creating space for local people to participate and arrive at independent decisions to meet their peace aspirations. The local turn clarifies the post-liberal peacebuilding, which emphasises participation of ordinary people in peacebuilding processes. Consequently, discourses on bottom-up peacebuilding and post-liberal peacebuilding argue in favour of the prominent role of participatory peacebuilding.

Participatory peacebuilding is helpfully explained by Nascimento, Keeler & Jacobs (2004, p. 6):

First of all, local population is involved. Consequently, the peacebuilding process will become their process, in which they are closely involved. They will determine to a great extent how the process will look. It is not someone else's plan imposed on them. Participation also means that it [peacebuilding process] is drawn from local conflict handling potential [home grown]. This approach generally enjoys a high level of legitimacy and credibility. No methods, concepts or models for resolving conflict or building peace are imposed from outside. Rather they are based on the local understanding of conflict and resolving and fit their ways of being and doing. All this will create a feeling among people in the conflict setting that they own the peacebuilding process.

As the above excerpt suggests, participatory peacebuilding involves local agency, which embraces both peacebuilding from below and within. Participatory peacebuilding is the focus of this study.

Methodological note

This study reports evaluation activities conducted by ordinary people through the AR framework. AR is a family of participatory methodologies that integrate theory and action, with a goal to facilitate collaboration between researchers and local people to address social problems bedeviling them (Coghlan & Brannick 2014; Bradbury 2015). It involves a professional researcher forming a partnership/collaboration with local people, and together takes the responsibility to co-define the problem, co-design the initiative, and co-implement and co-generate the solution to the problem (Greenwood, Whyte & Harkavy 1993; Stiefel 2001; Bradbury 2015).

Originally, AR was limited to the field of education, in particular relevant to school settings with the goal to improve teaching and learning skills for both teachers and pupils (Lesha 2014). AR has been applied in different disciplines such as agriculture, health, social work, and various sectors of rural development. In the recent past, AR has also been implemented in peace interventions (Elder 2016). The thrust of AR is the implementation of plans/projects, and to carefully study the impact of interventions, assessing existing practices and determine what positive changes may need to be made. Consequently, findings from an AR research event are used to modify existing practices/operations, and for improving planning for new initiatives.

This study reports the implementation of AR by individuals who designed, implemented and evaluated their peace intervention initiative, in order to improve the quality of life of their communities and families in Seke district.

Action research in ward 8 of Seke district

AR is not a linear process as is the case with traditional research, rather it is cyclical. These cycles are by nature knowledge producing, and thus bring about a new practice. In ward 8 of Seke district, these cycles involved five subsequent stages namely; problem identification; action planning; taking action; evaluation and re-planning (Coghlan & Brannick 2014).

The first and second stages involved problem identification and action planning. To test the peace committee intervention, I made use of prior contacts with other stakeholders and the minister of religion who played the role of the interim chairperson, while I facilitated the process. The conflict issues outlined above were the impetus behind the plan and action to form the WPC. Some of these conflict issues emerged during the planning stages, while others were identified after the WPC was already established. As a result, the first stage leading to the formation of the peace structure involved identification of the criteria and composition for the would-be peace committee members. For that reason, we resolved that the peace committee was to have 15 members inclusive of both male and female adults. The idea of settling for 15 members was borrowed from the focus group model in which six people are considered a small group while 15 are considered a larger group. After two months of planning, a call for the information day was made, and would-be peace committee members attended the meeting.

This third stage involved putting resolutions from planning meetings, discussions and reflections into action. For example, on the day of the information meeting, the interim chairperson consulted with would-be peace committee members that turned up, and we agreed to form the WPC, using the self-selection process in which individuals volunteered to occupy certain positions while at the same time the entire group approved their appointments. I was appointed secretary of the peace committee. The minister of religion was endorsed to take up the position of chairperson by all group members. Following the formation of the WPC, a meeting was convened in which the chairperson deliberated on how we were going to form a partnership in the context of my research to which all group members agreed. From that point on, they became my advisory team, which came to be known as: participatory action group (PAG). To conform to the basic tenets of AR, the PAG played a leading role in planning meetings and discussions in search of solutions to peace and development challenges, while I took a facilitation role. The PAG comprised of seven males and eight females.

Subsequently, formal and informal meetings and discussions were convened, presided over by the chairperson. Given that I was the as secretary of the group I was studying, a trustful relationship was established and sustained during the period under review. A trustful relationship was facilitated, because the position of the secretary gave me the opportunity to discuss both formally and informally with fellow WPC members, regarding what worked and what did not work during meetings and in other fora. As a matter of fact, this relationship has outlived the nine months period we worked together in the peace committee.

In the fourth and last stages, evaluation and re-planning were done collaboratively. Over a period of nine months after its formation, the WPC (comprising of security, religion, traditional leadership, politics, business, subsistence farming, and health sectors) engaged in a self-evaluation process. Of the 15 WPC members only 11 participated in the evaluation. Ages ranged between early 40s and early 70s with four female and seven male adults. Prior to evaluation, we designed the evaluation guide with input from all participants. In the evaluation we examined '*methods used for setting up the WPC'*, '*challenges experienced', knowledge gained'* and *lessons learnt'*.

The evaluation process was facilitated by the chairperson of the peace committee, while all participants were seated in a circular format. The chairperson read each question, and everyone participated in analysing the accompanying responses, and as secretary of the committee, I was involved in recording the proceedings manually and complemented by a voice recorder to capture all that transpired. In the process, all members shared their experiences, and listened to one another in an atmosphere of openness and mutual understanding.

Group discussion was the primary data collection instrument, which captured shared experiences and perceptions of procedures employed in forming the peace committee, challenges faced and lessons learnt. To gain perspectives from different participants, where appropriate the direct words of participants were used for the purposes of this article. Also, to protect confidentiality of participants, I identified them according to their sectors in the report.

Key findings and discussion

All participants were in agreement that a peace committee involves a group of people that come together with a common goal, which is to promote social harmony, peaceful co-existence and the improvement of livelihoods.

Methods employed for setting up the ward peace committee

All participants acknowledged that the created peace committee was a pilot project. They acknowledged that the process leading to its creation was participatory in that members were consulted, and they participated in approving individuals who were appointed to positions on the day of its creation. In literature there are no specific procedures for creating informal peace committees, as communities have to use what works for them (Odendaal 2010; van Tongeren 2012).

Challenges faced in forming the ward peace committee

One of the challenges was that of the 29 villages in ward 8, only nine villages[1] were represented in the WPC. All participants acknowledged that realistically the WPC could not have accommodated all the 29 villages to form a 15-member peace committee. To ensure participation of all villages in the ward about peace issues and not just equal representation, a resolution was made to sensitise all the 29 villagers in future to consider creating village peace committees (VPCs), as a move towards increasing the participation of all villages in peace issues at village level.

Another challenge was the non-regular attendance at meetings by certain members of the committee. This was because, after the creation of the peace committee, members agreed to meet on a monthly basis to discuss matters pertaining to the sustenance of peace in the ward. The biggest challenge was that attendance was sometimes below half, and sometimes it was half the full membership. For example, of the 15 would-be peace committee members invited on the first day of creation of the peace committee, only 10 participants attended.

During the second month, only six members attended the meeting. Subsequently, in the third month, it was reported that only nine members attended the meeting. In addition, during the fourth month seven members attended. During the fifth month, only 11 members turned up. Similarly, in the sixth month, on six individuals were present at the meeting. During the seventh month, only seven members turned up. During the eight month seven members attended the meeting.

Against the above fluctuation in membership attendance, participants resolved that those who were determined to attend monthly meeting, should not be deterred by defaulting members, as this was a common characteristic occasionally found among human beings to take a wait-and-see attitude whenever the initiative is in its infant stages.

1 Villages represented in the peace committee were Murisa, Chikambi, Chitehwe, Vera, Kuwora, Masona, Madhovi, Matambo and Marimbi villages.

In addition, another challenge raised was the non-representation of youth in the WPC. However, participants acknowledged that the non-representation of youth in the peace committee was not deliberate, but a coincidence in that only elderly men and women were the ones who availed themselves for the information meeting. For that reason, participants resolved that, to ensure youth representation, they were going to encourage the creation of other WPCs in which case they were going to advocate for one or two youths (male or female) in each committee to represent the interests of youths in peacebuilding.

Of all the identified challenges, non-regular attendance by some members appeared to pose a threat to the sustainability of the peacebuilding work. To discourage non-attendance, the WPC applauded those who were determined not to be deterred by defaulters. This encouragement demonstrated collective efficacy among members of the peace committee, which could facilitate the sustainability of peacebuilding work, particularly if the committee continues to be united by a common purpose and an interest to promote peace in their villages.

Knowledge gained

All participants were in agreement that there were two key elements that increased their knowledge about peacebuilding. The first was that most participants used to associate peacebuilding with conflict resolution, with no connection to improved livelihoods. They noted that through their membership and interaction in the WPC activities, they had been able to combine conflict resolution with income-generating activities, which some members of the peace committee previously thought had no mutual connection. As one participant remarked, "now I understand peacebuilding as a joint-process whose core objective is to build relationships and improve livelihoods by addressing peace challenges" (Subsistence farmer, female, mid 40s).

The second element of knowledge gained was that an individual or a group can start a project with what they already have in their homes, instead of looking for a donor or borrowing money to fund a project. One participant was quoted as saying:

It was out of this knowledge that I became interested in resuscitating my project, which I had long forgotten, because I held to the view that a project becomes a project only when I have received money from a donor (Traditional healer, Female, early 70s).

This participant seemed to hold the view that low-cost income-generating projects such as market gardening or traditional chicken rearing are building blocks for peace at village level. Thus, all participants acknowledged that they were now better informed about peacebuilding work.

Lessons learnt

Specific lessons learnt were, first, creating a WPC was a worthwhile activity for the ward, because participating members demonstrated their capacity to take responsibility for their

own peace as a collective. Second, we also leant that creating a peace committee involving both men and women (but with more women than men) was consistent with contemporary efforts to empower women to become involved in peace issues. Finally, it was learnt that the WPC took a long time to address fluctuations in non-membership attendance, which were seen to threaten and derail the work of the peace committee.

Reflections on the creation of the ward peace committee

I am an ardent Christian, who was involved actively in a ministry for the past 12 years until 2011. My journey to PhD studies started in the year 2012. Subsequently, in 2014, I began plans to collaborate with local people in creating a ward-level peace committee. In my role as a AR adherent, I was caught between two conflicting processes for creating the peace committees: appointment and the voting systems. As the planning stage to create the peace committee was to begin, I took the role of an under-secretary while the minister of religion that I first collaborated with was leading the process.

From that time on, I became aware of issues I had not thought of before as a researcher. Most importantly, I noticed the unavailability of processes for creating peace committees, which was confirmed in literature through Odendaal (2010) and van Tongeren (2012). Regarding the processes for creating peace committees, I strongly believed that the voting system was appropriate, because individuals who were involved in setting up a committee would nominate their preferred candidates, and the ones who garners more votes take up the positions in a committee.

My initial encounter was with the minister of religion that I was collaborating with in creating a ward-level peace committee in ward 8. We resolved that the peace committee was to have 15 members inclusive of both male and female adults. After two months of planning, he made a call for the information day and only 10 would-be peace committee members were present.

On the day of the information meeting, I found myself thinking how the process of creating the peace committee was going to be conducted, because the minister of religion had indicated during the planning sessions that he was going to appoint individuals to positions. We had agreed that he was going to take the chairperson's position. I did not have a problem with him taking the chairperson's position, as self-appointment to the position was in accordance with the self-selection process in which individuals can volunteer to take certain positions in the committee (Sangqu 2014). I strongly supported him to take up this position given the time and efforts he had invested in planning, designing, reflection and implementation of the plan of action.

Our bone of contention was in the processes for creating the peace committee. As I interrogated him further during our planning stages, on why he was insisting on appointing members to certain positions, I discovered that he had experience in running a co-operative society. He was the founding member of a co-operative society and was running it for almost a decade and half. As an executive director of the co-operative society, the society gave him executive powers to appoint and expel some members. For that reason, he was prepared to use the same approach to appoint would-be peace committee members. I

strongly believed that a peace committee was different from a co-operative society, because the former is a business model, whose primary values are self-help, equality and democracy. Although these values are not too remote from peace, I considered them not a primary focus of the peace committees (whose values include among others, mediating conflict, inclusivity, negotiation, problem-solving, promoting co-existence, building social networks, relationships and mutual understanding to mention but a few). On this basis, I tried to persuade him to employ the voting system, to ensure people were free to select individuals that they knew possessed specific skills such as negotiation, mediation and peace consciousness.

I was more familiar with the voting system, because I had used it when creating structures in church for the past 12 years. I was also aware that church committees were different from a peace committee, the same way I understood that a co-operative committee was different from a peace committee. On the day of the information sharing meeting, though I thought of myself as well-versed in the voting system, and as a researcher who had read widely about peace committees, I felt in-adequate when the interim chairperson made appointments. Prior to appointments, as I was discussing with him, I found myself thinking of how little it was for him to see the limitations of appointing people to positions, rather than to allow them to vote for their preferred individuals. My concern was on how participation was going to be stifled, if he went ahead with the appointment process.

From that point on, I became aware of the influences of people's background on their daily interactions. Comparing my experience to that of the chairperson, I realised that my understanding of the voting system was not commonly perceived as a means to participation as I used to understand it for the past 12 years through church activities. As more differences in our approach to processes for creating peace committees became apparent, I must be honest that I lost a bit of hope, especially when the interim chairperson stressed that he had the right to appoint certain individuals that he was hoping to work with as members in the peace committee. At some stage, he even stressed the point that appointing people to positions gives him the right to expel those who misbehave. I strongly remember voicing out my concern that committee members should be accountable to the entire committee, not to the chairperson. Even after voicing out my opinion, I was even more surprised that the interim chairperson seemed not to take my idea seriously, that committee members should be accountable to the entire committee not to the chairperson.

Interestingly though, proceedings that took place during the creation of the peace committee narrowed down my concerns, because the would-be members of the peace committee were free to chip in to approve and disapprove some appointed members. In fact, the chairperson consulted with all of us while making appointments. Because of the flexibility and open-endedness of the process, I was appointed deputy chairperson of the peace committee at first, but I declined that offer, and opted for the secretary's position, and all the members who were present approved my self-appointment. I opted for the secretary's position, because I was hoping to continue documenting events and processes I had begun prior to the creation of the peace committee. The position of the secretary was helpful for me, because I had access to data, and I could easily do member checking during meetings to validate data.

However, although I (as secretary) held a position of power on the committee (in charge of taking minutes), local dynamics on the ground and the participatory engagement

of the entire process at the end led to a process where committee members did not just participate, but influenced the whole process. As the section: *implications of my position as secretary of the committee* in this report will illustrate in detail, my research participants influenced the research process, including the writing process of the manuscript in the context of my post-graduate studies. That being the case, a point has to be made that participation often results from very different, not always open nor always fully compatible individual interests. Thus, the experience of collaborating with local people as an insider was a learning curve for me. From this hands-on, one of the lessons learnt was that when one is dealing with local community members, there is need to learn how a community works. The reality in the context of ward 8 of Seke district is that life in the community is more habitual than cosmetic and therefore adjustment, patience, focus, commitment and courage should be embraced to achieve any desirable goal.

My experiences in the activities of the ward peace committee

During our monthly meetings and the self-evaluation, my belief towards the committee as the centre of power (having a final decision-making power) not the chairperson, remained unresolved, and this constantly came into mind. As we repeatedly held meetings for nine consecutive months, personally revisiting the minutes of our monthly meetings, and observing dynamics that were taking place during meetings, my attention got shifted from perceiving the chairperson as an individual who was working against participation and consensus, to a co-operative individual. Putting myself in his shoes, I realised that it was not his experiences alone that seemed to obstruct him from accepting my perspective as quickly as I expected, but that changing beliefs and perspectives was not an overnight thing as I was hoping.

At the last stage, I became aware of my own biases (feelings or experiences interfering in the research process) and how I brought them into my research. I realised that I was also not willing to accommodate, and even to seek clarity on the chairpersons' perspective on what he meant by appointment. My thinking again began to shift when I read literature on how peace committees are created at community level. I got to understand that these structures are created based on culture specific norms and processes (Sangqu 2014). In other words, communities are left to use what works for them, as there are no standardised rules and processes. This is partly so because communities have varied social norms and values (Odendaal 2010). This discovery knocked some sense into my head as I began to realise how biased I was to operate on a one-track mind set on processes for creating peace committees. Indeed, after reflecting on my being biased, I tried to put myself in the chairperson's shoes and realised that he was basing his arguments on culture, to appoint people for positions as the chairperson. In Shona culture, a chairperson assumes the role of a father or mother thus, this position gives him/her an elevated position in the committee. A classic example is a village head that chairs both the village assembly and village development committee, and automatically assumes the role of a father/mother of all members of the village. Within that assumed role he /she is expected to possess culture specific attributes such as being above reproach, faithful, impartial, the ability to address disputes,

fairness, and respectful of subordinates, well-advised but also firm and decisive. During my discussion with the interim chairperson, I missed out on these aspects, especially on decisiveness, and mistakenly took it to signify dominance of other members in the committee.

Later on I realised that participation is a social construct. In other words, societies create it, implying that participation does not just happen naturally. In Shona society, participation is played out in institutions such as the chief council or village assemblies. Mudenge (1998) in agreement with Gombe (2006) pointed out that Shona society is governed by a council of elders popularly known as *Machinda Amambo* (chief's councilors), while villages are governed by village assemblies. They note that the responsibilities of these institutions involved, among other things: facilitation of disputes, and sustenance of law and order in society. The availability of a council of chiefs and village assemblies signify a participatory approach on matters of common interest in Shona society and villages. At village level, although the village head is hereditary, he/she is expected to embrace the participatory approach where people have opportunities to participate and discuss matters together, and come up with common agreement ,whenever there is an issue that calls for collective efforts or not. From this point on, I began to understand that the WPC operating in Shona communities is another formation which replicates the chief's council or village assembly in one way or the other. Thus, I began to accept that the chairperson's role to take a decisive action to appoint people to positions was not an isolated approach, because in Shona culture the process of appointment involves the participation of members of the community, who approve and disapprove certain individuals to positions. This participatory dynamic was played out on the information day by the would-be members of the peace committee.

Overall, what influenced my views and beliefs more to shift when we worked as a team was that, although some members seemed to have dominated the group by voicing their opinions more than others, eventually the chairperson was able to contain the discussion by summarising and clarifying the agreed resolution. Among all these dynamics, as the secretary I occasionally conducted member checking, and all the members were very co-operative.

The implications of my position as secretary and researcher

My entry into the social space was to set up a WPC in Ward 8, which occurred within the context of prior contacts with some of the peace committee members that I collaborated with. In the context of a research study, prior contacts can pose some potential risks to the shared social space. The risks border around over-familiarisations or manipulation of the process by the researcher, which can potentially distort the results (Burns et al. 2012). Being cautious of these possibilities, I had to be honest with my co-researchers as to why I preferred to work with people I already knew, rather than with those I had no prior contacts with. One of the major reasons was that I wanted to understand how community structures function from an insider's point of view. The merits of gaining access to individuals I had prior contacts and interactions with outweighed the interactions with indi-

viduals with whom I had no prior contacts. Thus, this report was written from an insider's point of view.

Regarding the creation of the WPC, participants in ward 8 had no intention of taking on board the AR framework, because the creation of the peace committee had no academic component from the outset. I was not the only one who came up with the idea of creating a WPC, the idea came from a group of participants which included myself, after having undergone a three-day conflict resolution sensitisation workshop, which was administered by one civic organisation called Ecumenical Church Leader's Forum. After the workshop members were urged to decide what to do next to ensure their community sustains peace. The 30 participants, including myself, resolved that creating a peace committee[2] was a worthwhile investment. The objective of my study was to test whether and under what conditions informal peace committees can be effective peacebuilding mechanisms (Chivasa 2017). AR was my proposed methodology.

There was no standing committee to spearhead the creation of the peace committee. Two months after we had made a resolution to create a peace committee, I approached the minister of religion who was co-ordinating the workshop, and later became the interim chairperson of the WPC. I explained the purpose of my research to him, and asked for possible collaboration and he agreed. During the planning sessions I appointed myself to the position of an under-secretary for planning purposes. Two factors contributed to the adoption of the AR methodology prior to the creation of the peace committee by the chairperson and myself.

Firstly, it was my brain child, in line with my proposed research methodology and my involvement in the planning process, that led to the adoption of AR in setting up the peace committee. Prior to the creation of the peace committee, I took time to coach the chairperson, and to highlight to him the advantages of using the AR method that it was going to benefit would-be participating committee members, given its propensity to create spaces for collaborative planning, reflection, decision making and problem-solving. Furthermore, I highlighted that AR was going to help us assess the proposed procedures for creating the WPC; it was to provide us with insights to understand how community structures function, and help us improve future planning for other peace committees. Since the interim chairperson was conversant with both reading and writing English language, I did not experience any hassle after explaining and illustrated to him by way of pictures, using some pictures of the AR to get him on-board. I borrowed the idea of sharing the AR pictures to co-researchers from van Niekerk & van Niekerk (2009) who also shared pictures with co-researcher that they worked with using AR methodology in their study.

Secondly, the adoption of AR, resulted in the use of structured interview guide in the evaluation process. Owing to the participatory nature of the process, my co-researchers were actively involved in coming up with thematic areas in designing the evaluation guide. Because the process took place ordinarily within the context of our normal day to day activities, my co-researchers did not consider me as an outsider, and I was at liberty to voice out my opinions, but also exercised caution not to dominate the show, and end up reporting events that I would have created myself, and such a practice was going to pollute

2 The creation of a peace committee coincided with my study in Seke district which had already secured ethical approval from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa.

my research results. Thus, this evaluation took place within the scope of the normal life of people in their community in what Denskus (2012, p. 153) termed "part and parcel of the way things are done". This was so because the evaluation process was self-initiated by members of the WPC, without the involvement of any external agent from start to finish. I intended to evaluate this peace committee three months after its creation, but I had to make adjustments to fit into the schedule of the entire committee, which did not have a fixed date for evaluation until after nine months from the date of creation of the WPC. Simply put, the involvement of the WPC in the design, creation and evaluation of the peace intervention influenced the writing of this report, in that the date of evaluation was a result of their resolution as a committee, and the four questions that they proposed were the basis upon which this report was built. The report therefore is based on the deliberations of members of the peace committee.

Limitations of the study

The major limitations of this study were that the evaluation process was conducted by members of the peace committees, to enable them to learn from their own activities as insiders. While the use of small samples is compatible with a qualitative research approach, the results represent the views of 15 members of the WPC, and not those of the community of Seke district as a whole and ordinary people from the nine villages represented in the peace committee.

Concluding remarks

This study has reported the self-evaluation process by ward peace committee (WPC) and its outcomes. It is essential to highlight that the evaluation accounted for four action plans. The first action plan addressed the non-representation of villages in the ward and youth groups. It was resolved that once mutual acceptance is secured, every village in Ward 8 shall have a village peace committee (VPC) comprising the chairperson, secretary, treasurer and four (4) committee members. It was stressed that two positions shall be filled by youths.

In accordance with the culture of local people in Seke district, it was resolved that the village head shall automatically be the chairperson of the VPC, without having to be elected to the position, since s/he chairs all committees at village level. In terms of the procedure of creating peace committees, it was recommended that the WPC shall send two (2) delegates to a village earmarked for setting up a VPC, to secure mutual acceptance from the village heads concerned. Once mutual acceptance is secured, the village head will be expected to convene a village meeting at which event the WPC delegates will be expected to explain the concept of VPC and operation of the committee in the villages. It was stressed that the two delegates will be expected to assist in the voting process for the VPC, to publicly announce the names of those elected, and to parade them in front of the villagers for all to see.

The second action plan addressed non-attendance of members on meetings. It was resolved that if a member decides to step down from the WPC/ VPC, he/she shall write a let-

ter stating reasons for doing so. The WPC/VPC should deliberate over the letter and respond accordingly within one month of the date of the resignation letter. The member concerned shall not be allowed to participate in the work of the WPC/ VPC.

The third action involved the composition of peace committees in other wards. It was resolved that the peace committee should comprise all stakeholders in the ward such as neighbourhood police officers, religion, civil service, village heads and civic organisations working in the village/ward. This recommendation was proposed following a realisation that the current Ward 8 pilot peace committee has not been able to encompass all the stakeholders in the ward. Thus, it was suggested that the involvement of various sectors in the peace committee should be viewed as a strength, in that when these stakeholders meet they can identify relevant stakeholders, after which they can collaborate and co-ordinate their activities for the good of the community. It was recommended that, although a WPC should include all the various stakeholders, the committee should have a steering committee of seven people.

Finally, to address the problem of absenteeism. It was resolved that any member who absents him/herself without just cause will pay a US$.50 cents penalty. However, it was noted that only illness or death in the family or similar other serious issues shall be considered just cause for absenteeism.

As evidence suggests, one of the primary aims of using AR in the evaluation process was to facilitate close interaction between all stakeholders. Simultaneously, this article has shown how perceptions of individuals and groups can cloud one's judgement, resulting in conflict as was the case between the chairperson of the peace committee and I. Owing to this interaction it can be stated that gaining entrance into a community requires mutual acceptance, unless one makes use of existing networks.

This study has shown that individuals in communities, no matter how they appear illiterate or unscientific, cannot be pushed around simply because they have norms and values that guide their action and practice. Through this study I was able to make sense of my experience, feelings and attitudes, and discovered how these can possibly interfere in the research process, as well as in daily interactions with fellow humans. The most significant issue which I feel needs attention in this study, is the potential of AR to create space for ordinary people to have opportunities to participate in the design and implementation of peace initiatives, having the right to make choices and to shape peace initiatives in the direction that is suitable for them. The increasing shift in peacebuilding, from top-down approaches to participatory and community-driven peacebuilding initiatives indicates a new surge of interest in participatory peacebuilding.

Overall, results of the evaluation indicate the power of AR to facilitate peacebuilding M&E from the bottom-up, in which case people experiencing problems become innovative by creating partnerships to share experiences, knowledge and work together to learn from their experiences. However, bottom-up M&E is not meant to replace standard M& E processes, but to bring the former into mainstream M&E. Given that participation lies at the heart of AR, this study argues that multi-stakeholder participation can serve as the prime means to bring standard M&E and bottom-up M&E to come together to help promote collective problem-solving, self-monitoring, reflection and integration of multi-stakeholder interventions. This is so because AR allows groups working as a collective to learn from

their experiences, and participate equally in coming up with solutions to problems affecting their wellbeing. As such, the implications of AR for standard M&E is that as a multi-stakeholder intervention, AR can facilitate collective participation, as individuals and groups become adoptive and innovative, by forming partnerships and joint ventures to address peace and development challenges. Thus, without the involvement and participation of all relevant stakeholders in peace issues the question that arises is whether we are building peace at all?

Over and above the evaluation process reported in this study, the results of the peace committee initiative for the community itself showed that ordinary people in Seke district demonstrated local agency through the creation of peace committees in their villages. This local agency resulted in ordinary people working as a collective in designing and establishing a WPC. The formation of the three subsequent VPCs in their own villages, following the evaluation process, marked a slight shift from donor/elite driven peace initiatives which often come with already laid down objectives and templates. This form of local agency sets a pace worth emulating, considering that no peace committees were running in ward 8 of Seke district prior to 2014, except a few other peace committees in some areas across Zimbabwe.

The establishment of peace committees could be the beginning of home grown solutions to the country-wide peace and development challenges, out of which other communities can replicate making such interventions very significant. By and large, local agency by ordinary people in Seke district offers hope to the current national peace policy in Zimbabwe: the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC) that it is possible for local people to deal with local peace challenges provided the affected community is willing to take responsibility for its own peace and development.

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About the author

Norman Chivasa (Zimbabwe) is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Durban University of Technology, Peacebuilding programme, South Africa. He was a senior lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe in the war, peace & strategic studies section, History Department and adjunct lecturer in the department of peace, Zimbabwe Open University. His research focuses on community peacebuilding and informal infrastructures for peace. He has long been involved in community peacebuilding efforts in Seke district, Zimbabwe, where he has been working closely with villagers in creating local peace committees. His consulting specialty involves designing, implementing and evaluating local infrastructures for peace at village level. Email: normanchivasa@gmail.com

Author's address
International Centre of Nonviolence
ML Sultan Campus
Durban University of Technology
P O Box 1334
Durban, 4000
South Africa