



Rethinking African Solutions to African Problems: Toward Just and Sustainable Approaches to Conflict Resolution in Africa

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Abstract

Despite growing critical engagement with the African Solutions to African Problems (ASAP) doctrine, limited attention has been devoted to examining its philosophical and normative foundations. This article addresses this gap by offering a systematic critical analysis of ASAP, identifying and interrogating its core normative principles and underlying assumptions. Most importantly, the paper distinguishes between the doctrine's empirical assumptions, descriptive claims regarding the causes of African conflicts, and its normative prescriptions, which dictate how and by whom these conflicts ought to be resolved. Drawing on textual and critical philosophical analysis, the article argues that the ASAP doctrine rests on both flawed normative principles and empirical assumptions about the causes of conflict in Africa and the morally appropriate pathways to resolution. These shortcomings ultimately undermine efforts to achieve just and durable peace outcomes in African conflicts. To empirically illustrate these problems, the article examines the recent Pretoria Peace Accord as a manifestation of conflict resolution guided by the ASAP doctrine. The article contends that the ASAP doctrine should not be celebrated as a guiding principle for conflict resolution on the continent. Instead, it advocates for alternative approaches that better capture the complexity of contemporary African conflicts and embed justice and accountability as essential components in peacebuilding and conflict-resolution efforts.

Keywords: African Solutions, Conflict Resolution, Ethiopian Conflicts, Pretoria Accord

1. Introduction

The doctrine of "African solutions to African problems" (ASAP) has become a defining slogan in African political discourse and a central organising idea in the African Union's (AU) peace and security agenda. Although routinely invoked in responses to contemporary conflicts in Africa, the doctrine remains conceptually and normatively vague, as well as operationally inconsistent despite its rhetorical appeal and institutional entrenchment (Ani, 2019). As recent African conflicts demonstrate, appeals to African solutions often obscure complex political dynamics, raise questions about justice and accountability, and mask the persistent dependence of African-led missions on external actors. This article offers a philosophical and normative critique of the ASAP doctrine by examining the moral principles and empirical assumptions underlying its invocation in continental conflict-resolution efforts.

The intellectual roots of ASAP trace most clearly to George B. N. Ayittey, whose internalist critique of African governance argued that domestic political failures, not external factors, constitute the primary sources of Africa's crises (Ayittey 2006, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2011). By insisting on homegrown institutional reform and indigenous accountability mechanisms, Ayittey helped establish the normative foundation for subsequent articulations of ASAP. His work remains influential in framing African agency as a moral and practical imperative for conflict resolution and development.

Scholars, however, have long argued that the causes and remedies of most conflicts in Africa must also be situated within broader debates that recognise external factors, such as the enduring impacts of colonialism, neocolonialism, and geopolitical rivalries (see, for example, Achankeng, 2013; Adar, 2000; Adebajo, 2012; Akinola & Ramontja, 2023; Bah *et al.*, 2011; Bujra, 2002; Hutton, 2014; Mujaju, 1987; Murithi, 2005; Ndzamangwi, 2022; Deng & Zartman, 1990). Early analyses, such as those by Deng & Zartman (1990), highlighted how African conflicts are shaped by interconnected domestic and international dynamics, challenging simplified accounts that isolate internal causes from global structures. Murithi (2005) similarly contends that colonialism and externally imposed economic policies hindered African states' peacebuilding capacities, while internal corruption further undermined governance. He views the AU's early institutional reforms, such as the creation of the Pan-African Parliament and new peace and security mechanisms, as promising steps toward more effective continental leadership. At the same time, he argues that sustainable peace requires, among others, the strengthening of continental institutions, the empowerment and education of communities, and a greater commitment to participatory governance and civil society engagement.

Scholarly analysis also underscores the practical limitations of African Solutions, and their potential implications for securing just and durable peace. Adebajo (2012) and Koderö (2023) warn that while solutions developed through African institutions can function as a legitimate assertion of African autonomy, they are often appropriated by political elites to advance the national interests of some countries and their political elites. Insights from institutional and peacekeeping studies further demonstrate that African-led operations are rarely autonomous in practice. Williams (2013) and Williams & Boutellis (2014) show that AU peacekeeping missions, such as the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS), and the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), have relied extensively on United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), and bilateral support for funding, logistics, planning, and operational continuity. Hybrid arrangements such as the African Union–United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) and AU–UN transitional missions underline that African solutions to conflicts in Africa are typically co-produced with other actors. Research on African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and the African Standby Force (ASF) similarly reveals persistent capability gaps, financial dependence, and coordination challenges that complicate narratives of fully independent African solutions (Franke, 2009; Engel & Porto, 2010; Kaweesi, 2023; Vines, 2013).

Beyond institutional considerations, scholars have emphasised that sustainable African peacebuilding requires meaningful transformations in leadership, governance, and societal engagement. Drawing on complexity theory, de Coning (2016) conceptualises peace processes as complex adaptive systems shaped by dynamic and non-linear interactions among local and international actors. He argues that sustaining peace should be understood as an emergent and context-specific process in which resilient social institutions develop through local self-organisation rather than through externally engineered models of peacebuilding. Other scholars (Olonisakin, 2015, 2017; Olonisakin *et al.*, 2021) challenge elite-driven and technocratic peacebuilding models that neglect the lived experiences, aspirations, and agency of affected

populations. These authors contend that dominant narratives of peace and state-building in Africa have long been shaped by externally driven and state-centric models that overlook local interpretations of conflict and governance (Olonisakin *et al.*, 2021). To address this limitation, the authors propose reframing these processes through the lens of “conversation,” emphasising that attaining durable peace and state formation demands centring narratives, contestations, collusions, and negotiations that are occurring in a society (Olonisakin *et al.*, 2021:404). Similarly, Olonisakin (2015, 2017) argues that dominant leadership models in African peacebuilding often overlook informal authority networks and community-level agency that significantly influence peace and security outcomes.

In general, the scholarly discourse on peacebuilding in Africa is defined by three fundamental conceptual tensions. First, there is a clear divide between institutional approaches, which focus on formal structures like the APSA and peacekeeping missions, and approaches that view peace as an emergent, non-linear process driven by unpredictable interactions between local and global actors. Second, the literature contrasts elite-driven models in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts with people-centred models that prioritise the lived experiences, informal authority networks, and agency of affected populations. Finally, the ideal of African ownership of the management and resolution of conflicts is increasingly challenged by the reality of hybrid responsibility in peacebuilding efforts co-produced by African actors and international partners.

Despite the robust literature on the causes and remedies of conflicts in Africa, and the growing scholarly work critical of the institutions and practices used in conflict resolution efforts on the continent, there has been limited philosophical interest in scrutinising the central normative principles, assumptions and justifications underlying the major doctrines guiding them. This article narrows this gap by offering a systematic critical analysis of the ASAP doctrine, guided by the following research questions:

- What normative principles and assumptions underlie the ASAP doctrine regarding the causes and remedies of African conflicts, and are they well justified?
- What are the normative and practical predicaments of applying the ASAP doctrine to conflict resolution in Africa?

By addressing these questions, the article contributes to a deeper philosophical understanding of the ASAP doctrine and exposes the normative and empirical contradictions that undermine its potential to bring durable peace, justice and accountability to peacebuilding efforts in Africa.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: Section 2 outlines the research design. Section 3 identifies and critically analyses the central normative principles and empirical assumptions embedded in the ASAP doctrine. Section 4 analyses the Pretoria Peace Accord to illustrate the ASAP doctrine’s limitations. Section 5 concludes.

2. Methodological Approach

The article integrates textual and philosophical critical analysis. Textual analysis is used to identify the normative principles and assumptions behind the ASAP doctrine. In particular, the analysis focuses on the scholarly works of Dr. George Ayittey, who is widely credited with coining the term ASAP. This analysis identifies the core normative principles and empirical assumptions underlying his views on the causes and remedies of conflicts in Africa.

A philosophical analysis is then used to evaluate the soundness and coherence of these principles and assumptions through critical interrogation of key arguments and justifications given in support of them. To complement this normative inquiry, a case-study analysis examines the Pretoria Peace Accord as a manifestation of conflict resolution guided by the

ASAP doctrine. This case provides an empirical example demonstrating the ASAP doctrine's normative and practical limitations.

3. The ASAP Doctrine: Its Origin and Underlying Assumptions

The ASAP doctrine entered political discourse primarily through the extensive works of Dr. George Ayittey, who coined this phrase in response to what he identified as the 'two unfortunate phenomena' characterising African political reality'. He states: "The first is the unnerving propensity of African leaders to seek foreign solutions to every crisis rather than look inside Africa for them. Second, though noble and well-intentioned, foreign solutions often do not fit Africa's unique political and socio-cultural topography and have thus failed. Furthermore, foreign solutions often prove financially costly and take a great deal of time to implement." (Ayittey, 2009:7-8).

Two key positions characterise Ayittey's call for ASAP. First, he argues that internal factors outweigh external factors in causing Africa's crises. In his other works, he distinguishes between two schools of thought in relation to the causes of Africa's problems: externalists and internalists (see, for example, Ayittey, 2005, 2006, 2011). The externalists attribute Africa's crises to external causes such as colonialism, imperialism, and unfair global economic relations. In contrast, the internalists, among whom Ayittey situates himself, are, as he describes, "A new and angry generation of Africans ... totally fed up with African leaders who refused to take responsibility for their own failures and instead used colonialism and other external factors as convenient alibis" (Ayittey, 2006:4). Although he acknowledges that foreign powers and institutions have influenced African affairs, he insists that the root causes of the continent's problems lie primarily in the actions of African leaders. This position has led him to argue that "African problems must be solved by Africans." (Ayittey, 2005:26).

Second, Ayittey believes that African problems demand African solutions. As he states, "the very solutions required to save the continent are in Africa itself, in its own backyard. Africa does not have to copy the American, French, or Asian model. All Africa needs to do is to return to its roots and build on and modernise its own indigenous institutions" (Ayittey, 2006:523). In a different piece, he states, "Africa must be developed by Africans, using their own 'African model'...and this blueprint for Africa's future lies in Africa." (Ayittey, 2005:27). He heavily criticises African governments' overdependence on external solutions, viewing them as incompatible with African realities. Furthermore, he condemns the lack of African inputs and perspectives when foreign solutions are applied to continental problems. This is also one of the reasons why he is an outspoken opponent of the application of Western socialism in Africa, as well as the way foreign countries involve themselves in conflict resolution efforts on the continent (Ayittey, 1994). For instance, in relation to the US intervention in Somalia in the 1990s, he wrote that "Somalia is an African problem requiring an African solution. While the US and other nations can help, an African input or initiative is indispensable and should form the critical mass of any rescue mission. Local and regional initiatives should be actively sought, encouraged and supported. The destiny of Africa lies in the hands of Africans, not foreigners" (Ayittey, 2006:523).

This internalist position resonates with the views advanced by current and past African political leaders regarding the causes and remedies for Africa's problems. Recently, at the opening of the 36th Session of the AU, the Ethiopian Prime Minister stated (Ahmed, 2023):

Excellencies, when I stood before you last year on this same occasion, Ethiopia was just coming out of a costly conflict. This time, I am here to celebrate the signing on November 2nd, 2022, of the Pretoria Peace Accord between the Ethiopian Government and the TPLF [Tigray People's Liberation Front], which has led to the silencing of the guns in the Northern part of our country.

Ethiopia is where it is today in no small part because of the tireless efforts of the African Union and the wisdom of its deeply held belief in the principle of African solutions to African problems. One of the earliest and most powerful expressions of this principle comes from the opening statement delivered by His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie in his address to the first Summit of the OAU in May 1963. His Imperial Majesty acknowledged that future disputes among African countries were only natural. But he also advised that, when disputes arise, the effort to resolve them 'must be confined to this continent and quarantined from the contamination of non-African interference.

The Prime Minister continued:

Excellencies, Sadly, the principle of African Solutions to African Problems is not a silver bullet to address all our challenges, because not all our problems are the products of our own making. The challenge of climate change is a case in point. We all know that Africa's contribution to global warming is insignificant. Yet climate change is already affecting Africa more severely than any other part of the world. To this extent, climate change is an African problem, but its roots lie elsewhere.

Other African leaders have expressed similar sentiments. Kenya's former President Daniel Arap Moi repeatedly asserted that "solutions to Africa's problems will come from Africans themselves" (Run, 2013:26). Similarly, the former AU Commission chairperson Jean Ping stated that 'the solutions to African problems are found on the continent and nowhere else' (Vines, 2013:89). South Africa's then-President Thabo Mbeki, speaking with U.S. President George W. Bush in 2005, insisted that:

[...] our view has been that it's critically important that the African continent should deal with these conflict situations on the continent, and that includes Darfur. And therefore, indeed, you will notice that we have not asked for anybody outside of the African Continent to deploy troops in Darfur. It's an African responsibility, and we can do it. So, what we've asked for is the necessary logistical and other support to be able to ensure that we discharge our responsibilities. (The American Presidency Project, 2005)

Such views, however, are not limited to African academics and politicians, as foreign governments and international institutions have adopted similar discourses on the causes and remedies of conflicts in Africa (United Nations Security Council, 2018).

These recurring appeals provide a basis for assessing the key normative principles and assumptions underlying the widespread call for using ASAP in understanding and resolving conflicts. The following section, therefore, identifies and critically assesses the principles and assumptions underlying the doctrine.

3.1. Normative Principles and Empirical Assumptions Underlying the ASAP Doctrine

Building on the analysis of Ayittey's writings on the causes and remedies of conflicts in Africa, two central normative principles emerge, each grounded in underlying empirical assumptions about the nature and sources of conflict on the continent. Before presenting these principles and assumptions, it is essential to draw a clear conceptual distinction between empirical and normative claims. Empirical assumptions concern descriptive statements about the world: claims that can, in principle, be evaluated as true or false using empirical methods. For example, the claim that "conflicts in Africa are caused primarily by internal factors" is empirical because it refers to causal patterns that can be empirically observed and verified. Normative assumptions, by contrast, concern how things ought to be and involve judgments of moral obligation, responsibility, or value. For instance, the assertion that "African leaders should take full responsibility for resolving conflicts on the continent" expresses a normative

prescription rather than a verifiable fact. Clarifying this distinction is crucial because the ASAP doctrine often merges empirical generalizations about the origins of African conflicts with normative prescriptions about who ought to resolve them. This conflation obscures whether the argument for the ASAP doctrine is justified by moral reasoning, empirical evidence, or both. The term doctrine here refers to a hybrid normative-political framework that both prescribes how conflicts in Africa should be addressed and asserts descriptive claims about their causes.

Normative Principle 1: African Actors Should Own Responsibility for Conflicts in Africa

The first principle asserts that African actors should bear the principal responsibility for both causing and resolving conflicts in Africa. This claim combines two dimensions of responsibility, causal responsibility (for initiating or perpetuating conflicts) and moral responsibility (for resolving them). This normative principle is typically justified through three interrelated arguments: those related to the causes of Africa's problems, the one related to political responsibility, and finally, arguments based on claims of national or continental sovereignty.

The causation argument: This rests on the empirical assumption that Africa's conflicts are primarily internally generated. From this assumption, a normative conclusion is inferred: if conflicts are primarily caused by Africans, then Africans alone should resolve them. In this way, an empirical observation about causation is transformed into a moral prescription about responsibility. However, this reasoning is problematic on several grounds.

First, as discussed in the introduction, scholarly analysis of current and past wars and conflicts in Africa shows that most conflicts arise from a complex interplay of internal and external factors. Internally, ethnic and religious divisions, elite economic competitions, and corruption and repression by dictatorial governments often contribute to conflicts. Moreover, many conflicts and wars on the African continent have strong connections to external factors, such as the legacies of colonialism, the imposition of an extractive capitalist system, and geopolitical competition among foreign powers. Thus, the notion of purely or primarily internal causes is empirically unsound.

My main argument, however, is that creating a false dichotomy between internal and external factors is practically unproductive. Part of the problem here is the lack of objective criteria for distinguishing the most important causal factors from less important ones, since such assessments could depend on the assessors' values, beliefs and biases. As Hansson (2023:184) rightly puts it in a different context:

Our choice of "the cause" among the causal factors that (jointly) lead up to an event depends on our perspective on that event and its antecedents. There is usually no single perspective that is more "right" than the others, and therefore there is no "right answer" to the question what "the cause" of an event is. This can also be seen from a classic example, namely, the cause of cholera. If you ask a bacteriologist what causes that disease, you will probably be told that it is caused by the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae*. If you ask an epidemiologist the same question, you will learn that it is caused by lack of proper sanitation... They are of course both right. Their answers do not reveal a difference in opinion; they just put emphasis on different components in a complex causal process. The two answers can and arguably should coexist since they are useful in different contexts.

Similarly, any attempt to address conflicts in Africa in a sustainable and just manner should recognise the role of both internal and external factors, without overshadowing either. It is often the confluence of these two factors that leads to conflicts. However, this is what Ayittey fails to acknowledge. While he criticises African governments for grave human rights

violations and corruption, for example, he fails to acknowledge that these violations are often supported and facilitated by foreign entities through arms and military support, and exploitative economic arrangements. Without simultaneously recognising and addressing these latter problems, it is difficult to address the many crimes associated with African dictators and other internal actors. Therefore, analysing the causes and remedies of conflicts in Africa requires a systematic and holistic approach that recognises both internal and external factors. In other words, linguistic bickering over which factors played the primary or secondary role is unnecessary. Rather than selectively emphasising the role of individual actors, priority should shift towards identifying and integrating all potential contributors to both understanding the causes of conflicts and designing their remedies. In this regard, conflict resolution efforts could gain insights from the field of risk ethics and safety promotion that, from a practical perspective, is less relevant to selectively blaming individual actors for causing accident risks (Hansson, 2023). What matters most is to identify and consider all relevant contributing factors in the prevention of grave risks that jeopardise human life and dignity.

Second, the transition from the empirical assumption (that the causes of conflict in Africa are predominantly internal factors) to the normative prescription (that African actors should have the moral responsibility to address them) fails, even if we accept that these causes of conflict are predominantly internal. This is because, even in such cases, there are still compelling moral reasons for external involvement in conflict resolution. One issue is that conflicts rarely remain within national or regional boundaries; their humanitarian, economic, and security consequences often extend far beyond them. For example, the civil wars and uprisings following the Arab Spring triggered massive refugee flows that reshaped European domestic politics, strained welfare systems, and fuelled the rise of populist movements (Aktas, 2024; Araźna, 2014). Such interdependencies challenge the moral defensibility of excluding external actors from participation in conflict resolution.

However, the moral responsibility to intervene may arise even in cases where external actors neither caused nor are affected by a conflict. The moral obligation to prevent grave human rights violations and mass atrocities (such as genocides, the use of chemical weapons and systemic rapes, for example) ought to transcend geographic or political boundaries. The moral duty to alleviate suffering, protect civilians, and uphold human dignity applies universally, regardless of the origin of the conflict. Nevertheless, communitarian or postcolonial moral justifications are often invoked in support of the ASAP principle, centring on the role of political legitimacy, sovereignty, and self-determination, as will be shown below.

The political-responsibility argument: Another central justification for the ASAP doctrine is that African governments and institutions bear the primary moral and political responsibility to ensure the safety and security of their own populations. This position rests on the idea that legitimate political authority entails a duty of care: leaders are accountable to their citizens and must take the lead in addressing threats to peace and stability within their territories. Additional support for this argument stems from the declining engagement of the international community, often illustrated by the withdrawal or downsizing of UN peacekeeping operations in several African contexts, including Mali, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan (Denisova & Kostelyanets, 2023). This trend is frequently cited as evidence that Africa must assume greater responsibility for its own peace and security. From this perspective, regional organisations such as the AU and sub-regional bodies like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) are called upon to fill the void left by international actors, ensuring that peacekeeping and mediation efforts remain primarily African-led.

Both strands of this political-responsibility argument have significant limitations. First, the assumption of legitimate and capable domestic authority does not always hold in Africa. As

Ayittey himself has recognised, most African governments are dictatorships that do not respect or abide by basic democratic principles such as the rule of law, transparency, and accountability. These regimes lack political legitimacy among the people they rule. Where power is maintained through coercion, patronage, or repression rather than democratic consent, the moral and political legitimacy to claim exclusive responsibility for conflict resolution becomes questionable. Assigning such responsibility to unaccountable regimes risks reinforcing authoritarian control and excluding the voices of citizens most affected by conflict. Moreover, many conflicts in Africa span multiple countries, making it difficult to find an impartial government or political institution to resolve them¹.

Second, the argument that African actors and institutions should assume responsibility for addressing conflicts in Africa, given the disengagement of international actors, seems understandable. However, while it is practical for African institutions to step in where external engagement diminishes, this does not absolve the external actors and the international community of their legal and moral obligations. As discussed in the section above, many external factors contribute to the emergence of conflicts in Africa, including, but not limited to, geopolitical and economic interests and the ensuing competition among foreign powers. The policies and actions of these external entities have profound implications for both the emergence and management of conflicts across the continent. Moreover, conflicts that have regional, continental and global repercussions, through displacement, resource flows, or humanitarian crises, remain matters of shared concern. Hence, moral responsibility for conflict resolution should be understood as a joint effort that extends beyond continental borders to include all actors causally or morally implicated. In general, while African leadership and ownership in peace building are both necessary and desirable, they cannot justifiably exclude broader international responsibility. A morally defensible framework must recognise both the role of African institutions and the continuing global duty to prevent harm and support just, sustainable peace.

It should also be noted that international institutions sometimes withdraw from conflict areas in response to actions taken by host governments (Eyanae, 2022). For example, in Darfur, Sudan, the Khartoum government repeatedly restricted UNAMID by limiting peacekeepers' movements, denying access to certain areas, denying visas to necessary personnel, and sometimes blocking the logistics required for the effective conduct of UN operations (Ibid.). During the recent Ethiopian war, the federal government expelled seven UN officials in September 2021 following warnings about famine in Tigray, accusing them of meddling in domestic affairs, and subsequently sought to end the mandate of the UN-backed International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia in 2023 (United Nations, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2023). These actions forced the UN to limit its operational reach and adapt its mandates in Ethiopia.

The sovereignty argument: A third justification for restricting primary responsibility for conflict resolution to African actors invokes the principle of sovereignty, namely that external intervention infringes on national and continental self-determination. This rationale resonates strongly with Africa's historical struggle against colonial domination and external imposition. Sovereignty, in this view, serves as both a shield against unjustified external interference and a basis for African leadership and ownership of development and peacebuilding processes.

¹ For a historical example of this institutional bias, see Abdullahi's (2026) analysis of how the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah mediated the border disputes between Ethiopia and Somalia during the 1960s.

The claim of African-led responsibility is further reinforced by historical patterns of ill-designed foreign interventions that have often bypassed local actors and prioritised the strategic interests of intervening powers. Such interventions are frequently criticised as neo-colonial, undermining African agency and violating sovereignty. For example, the 2011 intervention in Libya by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) drew widespread criticism for proceeding without consultation with African actors (see Smith-Windsor, 2013). Scholars note that foreign interventions often exacerbate conflicts rather than resolve them due to misaligned strategies and external interests (Schmidt, 2013). These critiques demonstrate why African actors are often justified in asserting primary ownership over conflict resolution.

However, the sovereignty argument faces important normative and practical limitations like the other arguments above. First, while sovereignty can protect against illegitimate intervention, treating it as absolute may shield domestic actors from accountability. As mentioned above, many African governments operate with weak democratic legitimacy or rely on coercion rather than consent. In such cases, exclusive reliance on African actors risks legitimising abusive regimes and ignoring the rights and safety of affected populations.

Second, concern for sovereignty does not negate shared moral responsibility since conflicts in Africa often have major regional and global implications. Even when African actors hold primary responsibility, external actors may have a moral obligation to prevent harm or support just and sustainable resolutions. This perspective aligns with African norms themselves: Article 4(h) of the AU Constitutive Act (African Union, 2003) allows intervention in cases of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, illustrating that sovereignty carries corresponding responsibilities.

A further counterargument that reinforces the limits of excluding external actors is that although foreign interventions have historically been problematic, that does not justify their wholesale exclusion from either causal or remedial responsibility. On the contrary, such interventions confirm that external actors often have direct interests and involvement in African conflicts, making them morally relevant to conflict analysis. At the same time, these shortcomings highlight the need for reform in the policies and behaviour of foreign powers and international institutions when they engage with conflicts in Africa. Excluding them entirely risks ignoring both their contributions to conflict dynamics and the potential for constructive engagement through reformed, accountable intervention.

Normative Principle 2: African Problems Should be Resolved Through Africa's Own Conflict-Resolution Mechanisms

The second normative principle asserts that African conflicts should be addressed primarily through African institutions and traditional mechanisms. Ayittey strongly emphasises this point, arguing that Africa's problems can only be solved by Africans themselves. According to Ayittey, external interventions often undermine indigenous agency, perpetuate dependency, and fail to account for Africa's historical and socio-cultural specificities (Ayittey, 2005). He articulates this principle through two main expressions: reliance on continental and regional organisations (Ayittey, 2009, 2010a) and preference for indigenous, community-based conflict-resolution practices (Ayittey, 2010b).

With respect to continental and regional mechanisms, Ayittey contends that these institutions are best positioned to mediate conflicts because of their proximity, knowledge of local contexts, and cultural legitimacy. He stresses that "African institutions must take the lead, for solutions imposed externally often reflect foreign interests and agendas rather than

the real needs of Africans" (Ayittey, 2009:112). Consequently, reliance on continental institutions is seen as a means of asserting agency, avoiding neo-colonial interference, and cultivating self-determination. On the other hand, Ayittey advocates indigenous mechanisms, such as councils of elders, customary arbitration, and traditional reconciliation processes, for their cultural appropriateness, affordability, and capacity to reconcile local communities (Ayittey, 2010b). He maintains that such mechanisms have historically provided effective governance and conflict mitigation at the community level. While Ayittey's argument underscores the moral and practical importance of African ownership, several critical limitations challenge the normative and empirical assumptions of this principle.

First, reliance on continental and regional institutions raises questions about legitimacy, accountability, and conduct. Many African peacekeeping and mediation bodies consist of officials appointed by non-democratic or authoritarian regimes, often without meaningful electoral accountability to citizens. Many of the military and political leaders involved in conflict resolution have questionable records of human rights violations, corruption and conflicts of interest (Levin, 2020; Wilson & Hurvitz, 2014). Rather than helping preserve peace in a conflict context, the participation of dictatorial governments in peacekeeping efforts has at times led to further human rights violations, exacerbating the situation of communities that have already endured the many cruelties of war. As Levin (2020: 778) rightly notes, rather than contributing to the preservation of lasting peace, the participation of human rights-abusing countries in peacekeeping operations helps them whitewash poor domestic human rights records and extort the international community into preventing interference in their domestic activities.

Moreover, the conduct of some African peacekeepers has revealed alarming patterns of misconduct and human rights violations. For example, during the African Union Mission in the Central African Republic, investigators documented extrajudicial killings by peacekeepers, including cases in which detainees were executed, undermining the moral credibility of the very institutions entrusted with protection (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Similarly, sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers, including African contingents, have been reported in multiple missions across Africa, demonstrating that proximity or regional ownership does not automatically guarantee ethical conduct (African Union, 2015). These failures highlight that African institutions, while locally situated, are not immune to misconduct, structural weaknesses, or political capture, limiting their effectiveness in ensuring justice and accountability.

Second, indigenous and traditional mechanisms, although culturally resonant and locally grounded, also exhibit significant limitations. They often operate within narrow ethnic or regional boundaries and are ill-suited to address modern conflicts that are multi-ethnic and transnational. The economic, political, and cultural contributors to wars and conflicts in contemporary Africa differ fundamentally from those of traditional African societies. Today, African countries are deeply embedded in global systems through the forces of globalisation, economic liberalisation, religious movements, and transnational institutions. Consequently, relying on indigenous African institutions may not be the most suitable or effective way to address the complex conflicts facing contemporary African societies.

Even when indigenous institutions are applied in local contexts, empirical studies indicate that traditional dispute-resolution processes may perpetuate exclusionary practices, reinforce existing hierarchies, and marginalise women, youth, and minority groups (Belay & Abebe, 2024; Garang & Sims, 2025). Another major problem with these local and indigenous institutions, in contemporary times, is their inability to ensure justice due to their propensity to be captured by political elites (Kita, 2019). Without neutral judicial bodies, they lack

mechanisms to impose corrective measures that prevent future violations, leaving affected populations without remedies or guarantees of accountability. Furthermore, political elites can manipulate these mechanisms to consolidate power rather than to facilitate impartial reconciliation, undermining their moral authority and practical utility.

Finally, the historical record of African-led peace efforts demonstrates that ownership alone does not ensure effectiveness or impartiality. Regional agreements and mediations, including the Arusha Accords (1993), the Lomé Peace Agreement (1999), the Algiers Accords (2006 and 2015), and the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (2018), often suffered from inefficiency, elite bias, and a failure to deliver accountability for war crimes (Guichaoua & Desgrais, 2018; Jok, 2021; Meisenberg, 2004; Storey, 2012). Mediators frequently represented governments implicated in abuses, and affected populations, including displaced persons and vulnerable communities, were underrepresented, indicating that African leadership does not automatically translate to inclusive or sustainable solutions.

4. The Pretoria Peace Accord: Physical Manifestation of Limits of ASAP Doctrine

On November 4, 2020, a war broke out in the northern part of Ethiopia between the Ethiopian federal government and the TPLF. What began as an ideological and political rift between the two parties escalated into full-scale warfare following the TPLF's attack on the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF). The conflict would soon involve a complex set of internal and regional actors. Externally, Eritrean forces entered the war early, aligning with the Ethiopian government against the TPLF (Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024). Internally, Amhara regional forces and Fano militias also entered the war and took over territories in Western Tigray that they claimed as ancestral Amhara lands (Kebede, 2024). This local-level mobilisation transformed a federal-regional dispute into an inter-ethnic territorial conflict, creating deep-seated grievances that remain unresolved. The involvement of Eritrea and internal militant groups significantly intensified the humanitarian crisis and complicated diplomatic efforts, as both Eritrea and the Fano militia maintained their own strategic interests independent of the interests of the Ethiopian government.

As the humanitarian crisis unfolded and the international community began calling for an end to the war and for accountability, the two warring sides advanced divergent preferences. The TPLF and its supporters increasingly appealed to international actors and institutions as the human rights violations and atrocities intensified, while the Ethiopian government persistently invoked the ASAP doctrine and denounced international calls for justice and accountability as neo-colonial interference (British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 2020; Embassy of Ethiopia, 2021). It strained and severed relations with Western countries that demanded independent investigations (Ambrosetti, 2025).

After two years of devastating warfare, the AU ultimately mediated the war with support from the United States and other international partners (Gebru, 2024). Framed primarily as an African problem requiring an African solution, the peace process was spearheaded by African institutions and directly brokered by the South African government and a few cliques of African political elites. The conflict was formally halted by the signing of the "Agreement for Lasting Peace through a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities", otherwise known as the Pretoria Accord, between the Ethiopian Government and the TPLF in November 2022. The head of the AU's envoy for the negotiations, Mr. Olusegun Obasanjo declared the signing of the peace accord as a practical actualisation of the ASAP doctrine (Obasanjo, 2022).

The signing of the **Pretoria Accord** marked a decisive turning point, as it ended the large-scale conventional warfare between the TPLF and the federal government. Nonetheless, its implications have been multifaceted. Among others, the process leading to the signing of

the accord effectively sidelined Eritrea and the Amhara militias, which in turn led to a realignment of tensions. In fact, just months after the accord was signed, Ethiopia descended into renewed conflict, this time between the federal government and Amhara Fano militants. Although no direct military confrontation has occurred yet, the relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea has worsened since the signing of the accord. Political commentators have pointed out that the signing of the Pretoria accord is one of the main causes of these new political tensions and military confrontations (African Review, 2025; Gebreluel, 2025; Kebede, 2024; Mohamoda, 2025). In general, rather than consolidating peace in Ethiopia, the agreement fuelled new internal conflicts and laid the groundwork for renewed regional hostilities between Ethiopia and Eritrea. These failures are closely tied to the normative and empirical limitations of the ASAP doctrine in addressing the war, as discussed below.

4.1. Simplistic View of the Causes of the War

The origins of the war between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray authorities cannot be understood in isolation from the shared history of the two warring parties, their mutual grievances, and the broader geopolitical context. The conflict was rooted in decades of economic exploitation, political subjugation and marginalisation, and entrenched ethnic and historical antagonisms, as well as the strategic interests and actions of foreign powers.

For nearly three decades (1991–2017), both the TPLF and its allied parties in the ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), jointly governed Ethiopia. During this time, the political situation in the country was characterised by systemic repression of dissent, media censorship, political and economic corruption, and ethnic discrimination, all of which are not in unison with democratic values. Despite these realities, the EPRDF received significant political and financial support from foreign governments, including the US and the European Union (Feyissa, 2011). The regime was considered a key ally in the Horn of Africa, particularly in the post-9/11 era, when Ethiopia's counterterrorism cooperation made it a favoured partner of US and European powers (Feyissa, 2011).

In addition to its strong support from foreign governments, the EPRDF government was also the beneficiary of large-scale aid and development finance from international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Brown & Fisher, 2019; Onyeiwu, 2022). Securing finance required implementing reforms prescribed by these institutions (Brown & Fisher, 2019; Onyeiwu, 2022), such as market-oriented reforms and structural adjustment programs. These externally influenced policies often are associated with adverse socio-economic and public health consequences, which disproportionately affect marginalised groups (Thomson *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, donor-funded development projects are often designed and implemented without due consideration for their societal, public health and environmental consequences. Among other factors, land grabbing for commercial agricultural purposes, shaped by the intersecting interests of domestic elites and international investors, contributed to the widespread displacement of communities across the country (Lavers, 2012; Rahmato, 2014).

The cumulated effect of ethnic discrimination, sustained economic exploitation, political repression and marginalisation sparked waves of protest across the country (Lyons, 2021). The most significant were the Oromo protests (2015–2018) against land dispossession and political exclusion, soon joined by Amhara demonstrations, which together constituted a nationwide upheaval that ultimately forced the EPRDF to relinquish control, leading to the rise of Abiy Ahmed and the formation of the Prosperity Party in 2019 (Lyons, 2021).

Prime Minister Abiy's ascent initially promised a new chapter in the country's political history. Soon after coming to power, the prime minister released unjustly detained political

prisoners, welcomed exiled dissidents, made peace with Eritrea, and spoke of unity and reform (Berming, 2021; Ayal *et al.*, 2025). However, these changes also unsettled entrenched interests. The TPLF, feeling marginalised by the new administration's rapid reforms and the dissolution of the EPRDF in favour of a new ruling party, retreated to its stronghold in Tigray and, by 2020, had grown openly defiant of the federal government. The prime minister's attempts to recentralize power and sideline the TPLF exacerbated tensions. In September 2020, the TPLF defied the federal government's postponement of national and regional elections during the COVID-19 pandemic by holding its own regional election in Tigray. The federal government, however, declared the election illegal and later decided to sever relations with the Tigray regional leadership while redirecting some federal budget transfers away from the regional executive. On 4 November 2020, armed conflict broke out between the federal government and the TPLF after the Ethiopian government accused TPLF forces of attacking the Ethiopian National Defence Force's Northern Command bases stationed in Tigray. The TPLF said it acted pre-emptively, claiming federal forces were preparing an attack.

The 2020 war between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF government was, in many ways, a battle not only over power but over historical narratives and blame. Both the Prosperity Party and the TPLF sought to externalise responsibility for past abuses under the EPRDF, using the conflict to shift accountability and reframe their public images. The propaganda war preceding the physical one was fuelled by mutual accusations over who was truly responsible for political repression, economic marginalisation, and human rights violations committed under their joint rule.

In general, a complex web of factors contributed to the initial regime change and the subsequent conflicts between the Ethiopian government (including its internal and external supporters) and various warring parties in different parts of Ethiopia. By focusing solely on the roles of the TPLF and the Ethiopian government in the emergence of the recent war, the mediators of the Pretoria Accord failed to appreciate the complexity and historical roots of the problem. Consequently, prevailing analyses of the conflict and the promotion of remedial measures largely neglect the contributions of EPRDF's exploitative and unjust development policies, its political repression, and the role of foreign entities and their policies. Moreover, the failure of local, national, continental and international legal institutions to effectively ensure accountability for human rights violations in the country has largely been neglected and continues to receive little attention in understanding the causes and remedies of conflicts in the country.

4.2. *Exclusion of key actors*

While the Pretoria Accord succeeded in silencing the guns and ending open hostilities between the two main belligerents, it also revealed profound limitations in the peace process. The negotiation and signing of the agreement excluded several key actors who played decisive roles in both the outbreak and escalation of the conflict. Eritrea, whose forces were deeply involved in the war and accused of some of its worst atrocities, was entirely absent from the negotiation table (Dessie, 2024). Likewise, Amhara regional forces and Fano militias, who maintained territorial claims and military control in contested areas of Tigray even after the agreement, were excluded from the peace process. Analysts have identified the omission of Fano from the Pretoria negotiations and the perceived bias of the accord as immediate triggers of the subsequent conflict in the Amhara region (Kebede, 2024).

However, the exclusion problem runs much greater than the absence of local and regional actors. As discussed in the previous section, Ethiopia's conflicts are not merely the product of domestic political rivalries but are also deeply shaped by external influences, geopolitical interests, donor-driven economic policies, and international complicity in authoritarian governance. Yet, these external dimensions remain largely unacknowledged in current peacebuilding frameworks. Since the second half of the twentieth century, regional and global powers have actively sustained successive dictatorships in Ethiopia with significant military, financial, and diplomatic backing. These foreign actors consistently prioritised strategic economic and security interests over human rights, democracy, or justice. Western governments tolerate, collaborate, or even enable systematic repression, corruption, and rights abuses so long as the Ethiopian state remains a reliable partner in regional counterterrorism, migration control, or market liberalisation. Similarly, emerging powers, including Russia, China and the Gulf states, fund Ethiopian governments through opaque infrastructure loans and development projects that often lack transparency or accountability (Sisay, 2024). This pattern of selective engagement has perpetuated authoritarian resilience and weakened domestic capacity for democratic reform.

The roles of international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, as well as multinational corporations, should not be overlooked. By prioritising liberalisation and privatisation, their policies often exacerbated inequality, displaced communities, and eroded local livelihoods, thereby feeding into social tensions and grievances that underpin many of Ethiopia's conflicts. Yet, despite the link between economic exploitation, marginalisation, and political instability, the implications of the policies and actions of international actors for peace and instability in Ethiopia are rarely publicly debated. Compounding this problem is the absence of effective international legal and institutional mechanisms to ensure accountability for both domestic and foreign actors implicated in Ethiopia's recurring cycles of violence. The international community's selective attention, condemning some violations while overlooking others, has reinforced a culture of impunity. As a result, rulers and elites have often escaped justice, whether for corruption, human rights violations, or the misuse of international aid and loans.

4.3. Neglect of Justice and Accountability for War Crimes and Human Rights Violations

From the outset, the war in Tigray was characterised by egregious human rights violations and mass atrocities committed by all parties. Ethiopian federal forces, allied Amhara regional militias, and Eritrean troops were implicated in widespread war crimes against Tigrayan civilians (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Human Rights Watch & Amnesty International, 2022). Investigations by human rights organisations have documented a horrifying litany of abuses in Tigray: indiscriminate shelling of towns, large-scale massacres, extrajudicial killings, widespread rape and sexual abuse, and the systematic destruction of civilian infrastructure, including schools and hospitals (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Human Rights Watch & Amnesty International, 2022). In the historic city of Axum, for example, Eritrean soldiers massacred several hundred civilians going door-to-door, executing boys and men in retaliation for a local resistance (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Across Tigray, occupying forces engaged in what has been described as an ethnic cleansing campaign to expel or annihilate the Tigrayan population in certain areas. A joint investigation by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch found that in Western Tigray Zone, regional authorities and Amhara special forces conducted a deliberate campaign to forcibly remove ethnic Tigrayans from the area (Human Rights Watch, 2021). This campaign involved mass killings, arbitrary mass detentions, torture, and sexual violence against Tigrayan women and girls, as well as the expulsion of hundreds of thousands

of Tigrayans from their homes (Human Rights Watch & Amnesty International, 2022). The joint report concluded that these acts in Western Tigray constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes, and it used the term “ethnic cleansing” to describe the overall campaign (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

One particularly insidious tactic documented was the use of starvation as a weapon of war (Weldemichel, 2021). After Tigrayan forces regrouped and recaptured much of Tigray in mid-2021, the Ethiopian government imposed a de facto siege on the region. For months on end, virtually all humanitarian aid was blocked from reaching Tigray, even as famine conditions set in (Weldemichel, 2021). By June 2021, around 350,000 Tigrayan civilians were facing starvation (Weldemichel, 2021). UN experts later determined that the deliberate denial of food and medicine to Tigray’s population violated international humanitarian law and likely amounted to a war crime (Weldemichel, 2021). Reports also emerged of Ethiopian and Eritrean forces looting or destroying crops, livestock, and food stores, compounding the starvation strategy (Human Rights Watch & Amnesty International, 2022). This concerted effort to inflict famine has drawn comparisons to acts of genocide. Indeed, as early as 2021, United States officials characterized the violence in Tigray, especially the expulsion of Tigrayans from Western Tigray, as “ethnic cleansing” (The Centre for Preventive Action, 2025), and genocide watchdog groups warned that the patterns of killings, starvation, and sexual violence might meet the criteria of genocide against the Tigrayan ethnic group (The Centre for Preventive Action, 2025). While the question of genocidal intent remains under investigation (Human Rights Watch & Amnesty International, 2022), there is no doubt that the Tigray war saw atrocities on a massive scale, targeting civilians because of their identity.

Notably, TPLF-aligned forces also perpetrated serious violations of international law during the conflict, especially as the fighting spread beyond Tigray (Amnesty International, 2022). After withstanding the initial onslaught, Tigrayan fighters turned the tide in mid-2021 and advanced into the neighbouring Amhara and Afar regions in a bid to pressure the federal government. During these incursions, TPLF troops committed atrocities against Amhara and Afar civilians, mirroring some of the brutal tactics seen in Tigray. Amnesty International and other human rights groups documented a pattern of revenge killings, sexual violence, and looting by Tigrayan forces in occupied areas of Amhara (Amnesty International, 2022).

Despite overwhelming evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including massacres, sexual violence, ethnic targeting, and forced displacement, none of the main actors has been held accountable, including leadership and military elements within the Ethiopian government, the TPLF, Eritrean forces, Fano militias and Amhara regional forces. Instead of facing justice, some of these individuals have been treated as legitimate political actors and included as key players in the peace negotiations. This approach undermines both the principle of justice and its perception, especially among victims and affected communities. More critically, the lack of meaningful accountability sets a dangerous precedent. By recognising and legitimising actors implicated in grave human rights violations without requiring acknowledgement or redress, the Pretoria Accord sends the troubling message that power and political leverage outweigh justice. This not only deepens the wounds of survivors but also risks normalising impunity in future conflicts. When atrocities are met with silence or political accommodation rather than legal consequence, it invites the repetition of such crimes, erodes trust in transitional processes, and compromises the long-term prospects for sustainable peace and reconciliation in Ethiopia.

5. Conclusion

The ASAP doctrine occupies a prominent place in African political discourse, particularly in relation to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Yet, the doctrine rests on empirically flawed assumptions and inadequate moral foundations that fail to capture the complexity of contemporary African conflicts. These crises are rarely purely local in origin, nor can they be resolved through exclusively continental or indigenous frameworks. Today, African states are deeply embedded in global systems of trade, religion, and geopolitics. Consequently, the dynamics of conflict are shaped by a complex interplay of internal conditions and transnational forces, in which, among other actors, foreign powers and multinational corporations frequently enable or sustain repressive regimes for economic, political, and military gains. Furthermore, the persistence of conflict is exacerbated by a pervasive crisis of accountability for war crimes and human rights violations on the African continent. The weakness and ineffectiveness of international accountability mechanisms serve as an enabling factor for instability, as corrupt and dictatorial regimes operate with the confidence that they can commit atrocities against their populations while evading justice. Authoritarian regimes frequently exploit the ASAP doctrine to evade external judicial oversight, entrenching a status quo where political elites face few consequences for crimes and human rights violations.

Securing sustainable and just resolutions to conflicts in Africa requires moving beyond the parochialism of the ASAP doctrine to a more morally and empirically grounded approach that recognises the complexity of causal factors for conflicts in contemporary Africa. Such an approach should be based on the values of global human solidarity and justice. The value of solidarity obliges all who can act to prevent human suffering caused by wars and conflicts in Africa, as elsewhere. No single authority should claim the exclusive moral right to prevent war crimes while excluding others from these efforts. Instead, the international community has equal moral rights and obligations to engage in the prevention of such suffering and in ensuring that perpetrators of war crimes and genocides are brought to justice.

Ensuring just and sustainable peace in Africa necessitates coordinated reforms across multiple levels. At the local level, it is imperative to enhance democratic self-governance so that local communities own the design and implementation of development policies that shape their future. It is also critical to empower local communities and strengthen their capacity to resist and expose unjust policies and inhumane actions by political and military groups. In this regard, it is imperative to create and sustain inter-community relations, for instance, by establishing connections with international civil society and non-governmental organisations. Moreover, it is important to engage local communities in peace processes rather than merely relying on elite-driven ones. At national and continental levels, strengthening accountable governance within political institutions is essential so they serve citizens rather than shield leaders. Achieving this requires impartial and effective national and continental legal frameworks. Internationally, such an approach demands structural changes in the global economic and political order. Among other measures, it calls for rigorous reform of international accountability institutions to ensure their effectiveness in bringing to justice those who commit war crimes. Moreover, it demands that international financial institutions take greater accountability for the economic and societal consequences of their engagement with dictatorial regimes on local populations. In general, a comprehensive conflict management process that recognises the interdependence of local, regional, continental, and global actors in shaping conflict and injustice in Africa is essential. Only through such an inclusive and multi-level approach can Africa succeed in its effort to address not merely the symptoms but the root causes of conflicts in the continent.

The study is subject to certain limitations. The reliance on Ayittey's writings as the primary source for interpreting the doctrine's normative and empirical foundations may not fully represent the diversity of African scholarly and policy perspectives on ASAP. Moreover, a purely philosophical approach cannot capture the full spectrum of views held by policymakers, civil-society actors, and regional institutions. Future research should therefore complement this analysis with empirical methods, including interviews, focus groups, and surveys, to explore how various stakeholders understand and operationalise the ASAP doctrine. Additionally, a systematic review of policy documents and scholarly debates could help trace the evolution and practical implications of the doctrine across different contexts.

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Funding

No funding was received for this work.

Disclosure Statement

The author declares that they have neither competing financial interests nor personal relationships which could influence the production of this work.

Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate

No ethical approval requirement applicable to this study.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the editors of this journal and the two anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of and valuable comments on this paper. I am also deeply grateful to Dr. Greta Gober for her thoughtful feedback and careful review of the manuscript. In addition, I benefited greatly from discussions with Dr. Karin Edvardson Björnberg during the writing process. Finally, I acknowledge the use of the paid version of ChatGPT for language editing and improvement during the preparation of this manuscript.

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