Managing Security Threats: Building Resilience for the Africa We Want

(10th Tana High-Level Forum on Security in Africa)

The Context

This year (2021) marks the 10th Anniversary of the Tana High-Level Forum on Security in Africa, the flagship annual event to engage in deep reflections to find solutions to the continent's myriad peace and security challenges. It coincides with a unique moment in Africa and the world primarily due to the fragilities imposed by the unforeseen outbreak and spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and state measures to curb it. While old fault lines remain, new ones are producing tensions and threats that are converging within- rather than outside- states in a way that is exposing the underbelly of fractured state-society relations.

The signals of threats to peace and security across the African landscape are evident in the weakening of critical public institutions, the resurgence of ethnoreligious and other parochial identities, and the proliferation of actors and risks in ways previously not contemplated. Yet even at that, the prevailing cloud of uncertainty provides the opportunity to think deeply and act decisively to confront such triggers and enablers of today's insecurities. Understanding Africa's security threats today also requires rethinking the role of actors and initiatives at national, regional and continental levels and that of international partners in soliciting solutions.

The Focus

The starting point of this 10th Tana Forum is to give primacy to African citizens in the discourse on security and resilience across multiple political, economic and social spaces. The overarching goal is to explore issues at the intersection of building a people-enabled peace, security and resilience in line with the African Union theme of the year: "Arts, Culture and Heritage." Alongside taking stock of the evolution of threats to peace and security challenges on the continent, the focus will be on mobilizing and building the type of home-grown and local resilience that allows the voice and agency of African citizens to blossom.

To do otherwise is to weaken the resolve and capacity of African citizens to face and defeat threats associated with terrorism, violent extremism and transnational organized criminality that now feature prominently- and dangerously- across the continents security landscape. From the Horn of Africa and across the Sahel arc, and from the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC to the Central Africa Republic and Mozambique, there is a sense in which Africa risks becoming the new epicentre of terrorism in the world. There is palpable concern over the growing threat of terrorism either undermining or overwhelming the coping and resilience capacity of the state in ways that put a great number of people at risk. Coupled with this is the phenomenon

of extreme violence and transnational organized crime, both of which have been further entrenched and exploited by criminal networks and non-state armed groups under the prevailing conditions necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic and consequent lockdown. The most telling fallout from this chain of threats is the weakness and inability of the state to respond effectively.

Added to this is that these insecurities have become the most important driving factor for the continuous displacement of people within and across borders and the accentuation of human rights violations in these conditions. The UNHCR report 2021 indicate a significant increase in the number of refugees and displaced persons in Africa. Without looking beyond approaches that have yielded little in terms of Silencing the Guns, the problem of terrorism, violent extremism, TOCs and the threats they pose to people and communities would remain and continue to grow.

In virtually every context that resilience is threatened or undermined, governance issues and priorities are stretched to limits that quickly manifest in social tensions, upheavals and violence. Underlying governance issues of lack of inclusion, injustice and rights violation, weak resource governance management, absence of social safety nets/welfare of citizens, withering local governance/authorities, declining economic/empowerment opportunities, flawed electoral system/process etc. are evolving into major sources of fragility with grave implications for peace and security. Against these backdrops, the evolving character and disposition of the state in Africa is tilting more towards authoritarianism and repression. The dual identity of the state as a provider of security and threat sources raises fundamental questions that border first and foremost on the status of the social contract between the state and citizens, and at a broader level, the quality of state-society relations.

Why Building Resilience Matters
The prospect of managing threats by investing more in governance and building resilience, with significant premium given to citizens active and sustained participation in public affairs, remains an important component in achieving resilience. Inclusion, participation and an enhanced democratic space are essential to addressing Africa's propensity to conflict and engender a culture of peace. Building systemic resilience from below by investing in local authority and governance that leaves 'no-one-behind' may seem uphill, but it is also the critical missing link required to confront and tackle the continent's myriad challenges today. Thus, the conversation around how to renew sagging commitment to the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Good Governance and other similar frameworks at regional and global levels, together with implementable action plans, has become urgent and imperative than ever.

Since the coronavirus outbreak in January 2020, Africa has had its fair share of the effects of the pandemic that has been more pronounced because the health system in

many countries is in dire straits. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has further exposed the crisis in the African health sector as a result of poor or outright lack of investment in health infrastructures that have greatly limited the capacity of health institutions to respond as effectively as they should. But COVID-19 is no longer just a health crisis but a hydra-headed public policy dilemma that touches virtually every aspect of society.

As participants at the 10th Tana Forum interrogate the health impacts, there is also a need to explore other multifaceted aspects in the context of peace and security, including how health systems create security challenges and vice versa. It would be important to assess how a resilient health system and the rollout of vaccines constitute an important source of in/security to other sectors at this critical period. Asides, giving attention to the risk of misinformation and disinformation, with the potential to fuel apathy, social unrest and conflicts, there is the need to evaluate Africa's contribution to the management of the pandemic, including investment in research and knowledge products that reflects Africa's solution to a global problem.

In addition, the political dimension of its linkage with the existing global power structure and contestation and its implication for Africa's politics and health security can no longer be discounted. Important in this regard, also, is how much data is driving Africa's approach to counter direct and indirect health effects of Covid-19, such as mental health and the accompanying socio-economic challenges. Finally, amidst multiple citizen-led initiatives currently in place is the need to document gaps and opportunities and what those might mean for state-society relations in the medium and long terms.

Africa now faces even more acute climate change and climate resilience challenges that have significant security implications for citizens in the context of food insecurity, migration, agrarian conflict, access to water, to highlight a few. It is well documented that climatic change induces migration which puts enormous pressure on communities to find alternative livelihoods and survival. What is perhaps less obvious is how attention to these critical issues is becoming overshadowed. Governments see them as posing lesser security threats than managing, for instance, political unrests, banditry, insurgency, and terrorism. Yet, without sufficient and timely intervention to manage them, climate risks can become a source of conflict, as is the case with farmer-herders clashes in Nigeria, sometimes leading to a greater form of hostility and security threats. A comprehensive policy with an implementation strategy on climate mitigation and adaptability would be key to driving climate resilience, especially in the context of peace and security at national, regional and continental levels.

At the heart of peace and security in Africa are numerous institutions, programmes, and initiatives at different levels to promote governance, transnational justice and reconciliation, and peacebuilding. Yet, despite the modest progress made in recent

years, peace has remained elusive on the continent partly because they are framed in a top-down manner that not only pay lip-service to the preferences and priorities of ordinary Africans but end up disenfranchising and alienating them. Thus, while the need to interrogate the functional relevance of existing peace and security institutions and normative frameworks at regional and continental levels, it has become more pressing to promote and re-establish the voice and agency of citizens. Localizing peacebuilding by bringing it much closer to the grassroots is, therefore, critical.

A key issue that sits at the centre of managing threats and building a resilient Africa is the mainstreaming and strengthening of youth and gender inclusion. The quest to mainstream gender in governance, peace and security agenda, and praxis has had a longer history than building a robust and resilient youth, peace, and security agenda for Africa. While progress on both counts is still far-fetched, there is no question that the ability of governments to manage current threats effectively rests largely with the constituency of the youth and women. Their demographic strength, projection and their demonstrated capacity to disrupt and to innovate demonstrate their tremendous importance. African youth continue to create resilience in alternative spaces such as music, arts, and culture through the digital space. On their part, women, much more than men, continue to bear the brunt of internecine conflicts, extreme violence and poor social policies while remaining underrepresented in key structures of governance. While their lack of inclusion may not necessarily pose an immediate threat, their poor representation within the peace and security framework reflects poorly on perceptions of threat and the strategies to address them effectively and sustainably.

This year's Tana Forum is invariably about how best to respond to emerging socio-economic, political, governance challenges or manage such threats in a way that we do not lose sight of the continent's most important resource: its citizens. How Arts, Culture and Heritage, the AU theme for 2021, can be converted into currencies for prompting enduring peace in the light of the continent's myriad challenges needs to be interrogated. By shifting focus away from state and institutions to citizens and peoples across different levels, the course of a better future becomes clearly defined and attainable.

The Forum further aims to offer participants another opportunity to rethink the nature, character and goal of international partnerships vis-à-vis the state of peace and security in Africa. Distracted by similar- in some cases, overwhelming- problems related to the Covid-19 pandemic at home, Africa's key international partners are rethinking the focus and content of their support in ways that may not augur well for the continent in the long term. In particular relation to prolonged conflicts such as the case in the Sahel, external forces have and continue to play contrasting roles that question their commitment to finding lasting solutions to Africa's problems.

Therefore, it would be important to understand and capture how diversity, equity and inclusion are reflected in Africa's international partnership/engagement.

By way of summary, the key arguments around which the theme of this year's Tana Forum is framed are as follows: (1) that building resilience has gained new currency in the light of new fragilities imposed by the unforeseen outbreak, and spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and state measures to curb it; (2) that measures towards building resilience must be deliberate in placing citizens at its fulcrum, recognizing and amplifying their voice and agency in the process of reimagining governance and peacebuilding; (3) that building resilience is not a one-off event but a process that takes time and resources; (4) that the state can only play a role that is necessary and desirable in building resilience if the deeply fractured social contract with citizens is repaired; and (5) that the international community can contribute to building citizens resilience but must do in a manner that is sensitive to their priorities.

The Sub-Theme

The final object of the Forum is to mobilize and synthesize knowledge and insights that would assist a range of national, regional and continental actors in contributing better to shaping the future of the Africa we want in a more promising and assuring direction. In no particular order, the underlisted issues will guide the 10th Tana Forum deliberations:

- Are continental and regional institutions on peace and security fit for purpose?
- What resources are required to manage better the transition from conflict to peace: peacebuilding, transitional justice and reconciliation
- In what way is terrorism, violent extremism and transnational organized crime today undermining peace and security, and what should be done to sustain/advance peace and security?
- Climate risks/resilience, displacement and security
- Managing threats through governance versus building resilience through citizen participation: is there a convenient middle point?
- The African state and in/security paradoxes (the state as security providers and threat sources)
- Contending African voices and agency in managing new security threats
- Building resilient health systems or a more all-encompassing peace and security architecture to manage health and related insecurity
- Managing Covid-19 data gaps and related security threats
- Citizens and the State in the contexts of changing state-society relations during Covid-19
- Building Resilience through youth and gender inclusion
- The role of art, culture and heritage in building a culture of peace from below.
- Is African leadership in peace and security feasible?.