Sustainable Peace in the Age of Disruption: Reimagining Conflict Resolution for 21st-Century Nigeria

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Abstract

The 21st century has ushered in an era marked by rapid technological evolution, global interconnectivity, and sociopolitical turbulence; an age aptly described as the age of disruption. From climate-induced displacement and digital misinformation to artificial intelligence-driven warfare and systemic inequalities, traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution are increasingly strained and, at times, obsolete. This paper interrogates the evolving landscape of global conflict and posits a change in basic assumptions toward sustainable peace through adaptive, inclusive, and technology-informed approaches to conflict resolution. Drawing on interdisciplinary insights from peace studies, artificial intelligence, digital diplomacy, and grassroots peacebuilding, the paper presents an integrated framework for reimagining conflict resolution in an era of complexity and uncertainty. It emphasizes the need to transcend reactive models and embrace anticipatory governance, intercultural dialogue, and locally owned solutions anchored in justice and equity. Case studies from diverse geopolitical contexts are used to illustrate innovative practices, such as AI-enabled early warning systems, blockchain-based peace agreements, and virtual peace dialogues. By exploring the intersections of disruption and peacebuilding, this study advocates for a future-oriented, sustainable approach to conflict resolution; one that is ethical, inclusive, and resilient. It calls upon policymakers, scholars, and civil society actors to collaboratively reimagine peace not as the absence of conflict, but as a dynamic process of transformation that thrives amidst disruption.

Keywords: conflict resolution, disruption, global security, peacebuilding, sustainable peace

Introduction

The 21st century has been characterized by unparalleled upheavals that have radically altered the nature of social interaction, human existence, and governance. Destabilizing long-standing mechanisms of governance, development, and peacebuilding are processes like globalization, rapid technological advancements, climate change, recurrent pandemics, shifting geopolitical alliances, and growing inequality.[1] According some scholar, Human society will always experience conflict, but the type, extent, and severity of violence now are very different from those of earlier times.[2] Conflicts in the modern world are becoming more transnational, asymmetric, and multifaceted; these include wars over resources brought on by climate change, terrorism and violent extremism, cyberwarfare, pandemics with security implications, and unrest brought on by the viral spread of false information.[3] These disputes present significant challenges for nations, regional organizations, and the international system

since they are not only more fluid and unexpected but also more resistant to traditional methods of resolution.[4]

The 21st century's disruptive forces are clearly evident in Nigeria. There is a serious humanitarian crisis in the northeast due to the Boko Haram insurgency and the larger Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) conflict, which has displaced millions of people.[5] Due to competition for limited resources, desertification, and climate change, farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt have escalated in violence.[6] Scholars[7] assert that in the southeast, separatist agitations have intensified into frequent violent clashes between secessionist groups and state security forces, driven by long-standing issues of marginalisation and identity politics. In the northwest, huge kidnappings and banditry pose a threat to rural security and economic stability, and widespread election violence is undermining the establishment of democracy.[8] Digital disinformation campaigns, poverty, youth unemployment, gender inequality, entrenched corruption, weak state institutions, and outside geopolitical forces that provide money, weapons, and ideological support all contribute to the escalation of these conflicts.[9] Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms in Nigeria, such as judicial settlements, security deployments, and elite mediations, remain important but insufficient. They often address symptoms rather than root causes. In the age of disruption, peace must be reimagined as resilient, participatory, technologically adaptive, and socially just.

Thus, considering this, it is critical to rethink conflict resolution in Nigeria and, by implication, other delicate situations.[10] Conventional methods like peacekeeping, mediation, arbitration, and negotiation are still useful, but they are becoming less effective when used alone. In a society where disruption is the norm, their reactive approach frequently ignores the structural and systemic causes of conflict.[11] Peace must be rethought as a dynamic, inclusive, and adaptable process that foresees crises before they worsen in the face of ecological stressors, technologically mediated violence, and global interconnectedness.[12] Therefore, the argument made in this paper is for a paradigm change in Nigerian conflict resolution techniques. In order to achieve sustainable peace in the twenty-first century, proactive, multi-stakeholder, and technologically integrated strategies are needed. Indigenous and community-based conflict resolution techniques must be incorporated into these strategies, along with contemporary innovations like digital peace dialogues, artificial intelligence-driven early warning systems, and climate adaptation initiatives.[13] They must put inclusivity first, giving voice to underrepresented groups, especially women and young people, and integrating accountability, equity, and justice at the core of peace processes.[14] By interrogating the nexus between disruption and peacebuilding, the paper seeks to chart pathways toward a resilient peace architecture; one capable of withstanding the complex and rapidly evolving realities of the modern world.

Conceptual Analysis

Sustainable Peace

The concept of sustainable peace includes long-term stability, justice, equity, and societal resilience in addition to a simple halt to hostilities. Contemporary research highlights the drawbacks of conventional peace models and suggests inclusive, bottom-up strategies that put an emphasis on transformative justice and local agency.[15] The

"local turn" in peacebuilding highlights that communities must be empowered to co-create peace processes from the ground up and redefine peace in ways that are culturally meaningful ("Sulhu" in the Nigerian context). This leads to sustainable peace. For example, Sulhu, a syncretic blend of religious and cultural norms in local DDR efforts in Nigeria, has demonstrated promise in promoting social cohesion, forgiveness, and communal healing while avoiding top-down impositions (such as legalistic frameworks) that might not be contextually legitimate. Scholars warn, however, that if such methods are applied carelessly, they could perpetuate local power disparities, highlighting the necessity of reflexive, context-aware integration.[16] Furthermore, initiatives must take climate and environmental factors into account to achieve sustainable peace. In countries like Nigeria, where resource competition feeds violence, emerging literature promotes environmental peacebuilding, natural resource management, and ecological collaboration as means of averting conflict and promoting lasting peace.[17]

The Age of Disruption

Our volatile era is characterized by the age of disruption, which is characterized by interweaving political, social, environmental, and technological changes that put traditional peacebuilding paradigms to the test. Disruption refers to forces that destabilise existing systems, weaken institutions, create uncertainty, and threaten social order. In Nigeria, disruption manifests through several interconnected political, economic, environmental, and technological challenges that continue to shape the country's peace and security environment. These forces undermine governance, reduce public trust, and intensify existing social tensions. Understanding them essential for designing sustainable conflict resolution strategies in the twenty-first century.

One of the most significant disruptive forces in Nigeria is terrorism and the activities of armed non-state actors. Groups such as Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), armed bandit networks, ethnic militias, and separatist groups operate outside the authority of the state and often use violence to pursue ideological, political, or criminal objectives. Since the Boko Haram insurgency began in 2009, thousands of people have been killed, communities destroyed, and millions displaced, particularly in Northeast Nigeria. In the North-West, armed bandits engage in kidnapping, cattle rustling, village raids, and attacks on schools and highways. These violent groups weaken state authority, create fear among citizens, discourage investment, and force government to spend heavily on security rather than development.[18] The pace of technological disruption is accelerating. To illustrate AI's ability to lessen polarisation through organised deliberation, consider the way that AI-enabled collective conversations employing massive language models have helped widely different organisations, including Israeli and Palestinian peacebuilders, come to an agreement.[19]

Climate change and resource scarcity also constitute major disruptive forces in Nigeria. Rising temperatures, desertification, flooding, irregular rainfall, and shrinking water sources have negatively affected agriculture and pastoral livelihoods. In northern Nigeria, desert encroachment and reduced grazing land have pushed herders southward in search of pasture, often leading to violent clashes with farming communities over land and water. Flooding in southern and central states has also displaced populations and destroyed crops. These environmental pressures intensify poverty, migration, and communal conflict. Therefore, climate change has become both an ecological

and security concern in Nigeria.[20] Concurrently, the dynamics of conflict are changing due to environmental shocks, including climate change and ecosystem degradation. Environmental deterioration in war zones can impede recovery and prolong instability for decades, according to recent global estimates. This calls for integrated solutions that combine risk reduction and cooperation.[21] Another disruptive force is social media misinformation. The expansion of digital communication platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and Instagram has improved information access, but it has also enabled the rapid spread of false news, hate speech, manipulated images, and inflammatory rumours. In Nigeria, misinformation has been linked to election tensions, ethnic mistrust, religious hostility, and panic during security incidents. False reports can provoke retaliatory violence before authorities verify the facts. Because misinformation spreads faster than official corrections, it erodes trust in institutions and deepens divisions among citizens.[22] Misinformation and divisive online narratives, as mentioned, are examples of social and digital disruptions that are changing the dynamics of conflict and marginalizing vulnerable groups, particularly women. Research on the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia shows how social media polarisation impacted women's involvement in peacebuilding, highlighting the significance of gender-sensitive digital peace tactics.[23]

Economic shocks and inflation are equally disruptive to national stability. Nigeria's economy has faced repeated crises arising from dependence on oil exports, currency depreciation, global market fluctuations, debt pressures, and subsidy reforms. These shocks often result in inflation, unemployment, declining purchasing power, and hardship for households. Rising prices of food, fuel, transportation, and housing place severe pressure on citizens, especially the poor. Economic frustration can trigger protests, strikes, criminality, and increased distrust in government. Where economic opportunities are limited, some individuals become vulnerable to recruitment into violent or criminal networks.[24] Rapid urbanisation is another force reshaping Nigeria's conflict environment. Millions of Nigerians migrate from rural communities to cities such as Lagos, Abuja, Kano, Port Harcourt, and Ibadan in search of better livelihoods. However, urban growth often exceeds the capacity of infrastructure and planning systems. This creates overcrowded settlements, housing shortages, traffic congestion, unemployment, poor sanitation, and pressure on healthcare and education services. Social inequality becomes more visible in urban spaces, while youth in marginalised neighbourhoods may be drawn into gangs, cult violence, and petty crime. Without effective urban planning, rapid urbanisation can undermine social stability.[25]

Youth unemployment remains one of the most serious socioeconomic disruptions in Nigeria. The country has a very young population, which presents enormous potential for innovation and productivity. However, many young people struggle to secure decent jobs despite having formal education or vocational skills. Persistent unemployment generates frustration, poverty, migration pressures, and resentment toward public institutions. Idle youth are often targeted for recruitment into political thuggery, cybercrime, armed groups, and violent protests. Therefore, youth unemployment is not only an economic challenge but also a security threat that requires urgent policy attention.[26] Weak institutions and corruption further destabilise Nigeria's governance system. Institutions such as the police, judiciary, legislature, civil service, and anti-corruption agen-

cies are expected to promote justice, accountability, and effective service delivery. However, corruption diverts public resources, weakens policy implementation, and reduces citizen confidence in government. Delays in the justice system, selective law enforcement, and lack of accountability encourage impunity. When institutions fail to resolve grievances fairly, citizens may turn to vigilantism, self-help, or violence. Sustainable peace is difficult to achieve where institutions are weak, and corruption is widespread.[27]

Electoral manipulation is another recurring source of disruption in Nigeria. Elections are meant to provide peaceful competition for political power, but they are often affected by vote buying, intimidation, ballot fraud, misuse of state resources, and violence by political thugs. Political actors sometimes exploit ethnic and religious identities to mobilise support, thereby deepening divisions. When citizens perceive elections as unfair, trust in democracy declines and post-election unrest may occur. Electoral violence has historically caused deaths, displacement, and destruction of property in different parts of Nigeria. Thus, credible elections are essential to national stability.[28] Cyber insecurity has also emerged as a modern disruptive force. As Nigeria becomes more digitally connected through online banking, e-commerce, education technology, and government digital systems, cyber threats have increased. These include hacking, identity theft, ransomware attacks, online scams, financial fraud, and data breaches. Cybercrime damages businesses, threatens citizens' finances, and undermines confidence in digital systems. Nigeria has long battled internet fraud networks, but cyber risks now extend to critical institutions such as banks, universities, and public agencies. In the digital age, cyber insecurity represents both an economic and national.[29]

Finally, increasing demands for justice, equity, and developmental reorientation are upending the sociopolitical landscape. By advocating for ecologically just models that take into consideration planetary limitations and long-term well-being, post-growth peacebuilding challenges conventional wisdom that places economic expansion above sustainable and equitable peace.[30]

Literature Review

Global Perspectives on Conflict in the 21st Century

Conflicts in the modern world are becoming more complicated, international, and influenced by a variety of interconnected factors, including mass migration, digital technology, globalisation, and climate change. Researchers point out that violence in the twenty-first century now occurs in cyberspace, information ecosystems, and delicate settings rather than just on conventional battlefields.[31] Technology has changed the character of conflict and peacebuilding, as seen by misinformation campaigns, autonomous drones, AI-enabled weapons, and cyberwarfare.[32] From the Arab Spring to elections in the US, Kenya, and Nigeria, the spread of false information and disinformation on digital platforms has exacerbated political polarization and civil unrest globally. Climate-induced conflicts are also intensifying, as resource scarcity exacerbates tensions in vulnerable regions. 33 Identifies climate change as a "threat multiplier" that interacts with weak governance and socioeconomic inequalities to destabilise communities. Migration flows, forced displacement, and statelessness add new layers to the global conflict landscape. Thus, peacebuilding in the 21st century must reckon with the interconnectedness of technological, ecological, and sociopolitical disruptions.

Nigerian Context

Nigeria is a prime example of the difficulties posed by conflict in the disruptive age. Artificial boundaries, ethnic division, and unequal resource distribution- colonial legacies that continue to exist in post-independence governance structures- are the historical causes of its conflicts. Poverty, elite appropriation of public resources, weak institutions, and corruption exacerbate grievances and incite violence. The north-eastern Boko Haram insurgency serves as an example of how digital promotion, socioeconomic marginalisation, and religious ideology combine to support extremism.[34] Conflicts between farmers and herders in the Middle Belt are an example of climate-related displacement, as pastoralists are driven southward by the Sahel's desertification, leading to fierce rivalry for land and water.[35] Economic inequality, the proliferation of small guns, and widespread youth unemployment exacerbate separatist agitations in the southeast and banditry in the northwest. Misinformation on social media exacerbates already-existing divisions and feeds hate speech, electoral violence, and a lack of trust in the government.[36] Therefore, the situation in Nigeria highlights how urgent it is to implement creative, inclusive, and technologically advanced ways to peacebuilding.

Technology and Peacebuilding

Innovation in peacebuilding is also made possible by the disruptive forces behind war. Around the world, emerging technologies are being used to promote accountability, communication, and early warning in conflict situations. The African Union's Continental Early Warning System (CEWS)[37] have piloted AI-enabled early warning systems to anticipate and prevent violent outbreaks before they worsen. To decrease corruption and mistrust, blockchain technology has been suggested for transparent peace accords and resource-sharing arrangement monitoring.[38] Digital platforms such as Zoom, WhatsApp, and VR-based tools enable virtual peace dialogues, particularly valuable during the COVID-19 pandemic, which restricted face-to-face negotiations. In the Nigerian context, mobile technology has been used for grassroots reporting of violence, while social media platforms have provided spaces for youth-led peace campaigns such as Not Too Young to Run. However, the dual-use nature of technology means that the same platforms used for peace can also serve as tools for misinformation, recruitment into extremist groups, and the spread of hate narratives.

Disruptive Driver of Conflict in Nigeria

The Nigerian conflict landscape in the 21st century is defined by a "convergence of crises," where traditional grievances-land, ethnicity, and religion-are being accelerated by modern technological and environmental stressors. Climate-induced environmental degradation is no longer a peripheral issue but a central driver of violence. In the northern Sahelian zones, persistent droughts and advancing desertification have significantly reduced grazing lands.[39] This ecological shift compels pastoralists to migrate southward, leading to encroachment on farmlands and violent confrontations with sedentary communities.[40] The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) notes that these challenges intensify existing vulnerabilities, particularly as agricultural production in conflict zones stagnates, leading to food scarcity and rising prices.

The 2023 general elections highlighted how technology can be "weaponized" to erode trust. While digital tools were used for voter mobilisation and result transmis-

sion, they also enabled the proliferation of "fake news" and manipulated media. Misinformation is often tailored to exploit Nigeria's diverse ethnic and religious nuances, deepening societal polarisation. Frequent reliance on unverified social media content has fostered widespread scepticism toward the judiciary, legislative processes, and electoral bodies, threatening the stability of democratic institutions. Economic inequality serves as a "multiplier" for conflict. Research indicates a significant correlation between conflict intensity and youth unemployment; as fatality rates and conflict frequency rise, so does the rate of unemployment, creating a cyclical "poverty-conflict trap". For many youths, militancy or banditry becomes a survival strategy in a state perceived as having "failed" in its crisis management and basic service delivery.[41]

The shift from reactive to proactive peacebuilding relies on predictive analytics. Systems like "Raven Sentry," which analyse 20+ years of conflict data alongside weather patterns and social media, demonstrate how AI can model potential conflict scenarios before they escalate.[42] However, this "epistemic revolution" carries risks, including power asymmetries where data brokers hold unprecedented influence over civilian populations in crisis regions.[43] Where physical access is constrained by volatility, digital platforms (Zoom, WhatsApp, X) now function as vital conduits for dialogue and narrative shaping.[44] This allows for a more "fluid, decentralised" approach to mediation, enabling the participation of marginalised groups who are often excluded from high-level, physical negotiations. There is a growing recognition that "Eurocentric" legal models often fail to address the root causes of communal strife. Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), such as the palaver huts of West Africa, offer restorative, morally grounded structures that emphasise communal healing over punitive justice. Integrating these with formal state-led approaches provides a "contextually aware rationality" that is more likely to be accepted by local populations.

Case Studies

AI in Kenya: Early Warning Systems

Kenya has been at the forefront of using early warning systems powered by artificial intelligence to forecast electoral violence. Research institutions and civil society organisations worked together during the 2017 elections to analyse hate speech, keep an eye on social media narratives, and utilise predictive analytics to identify violent hotspots.[45] The mechanism made it possible for peacebuilding organisations and security authorities to act in advance, which decreased the level of electoral violence in comparison to earlier elections. This illustrates how AI-powered predictive governance might benefit communities that are prone to conflict.

Blockchain in Colombia: Transparent Peace Agreements

Blockchain technology has been investigated in Colombia to improve transparency in the execution of peace agreements after the landmark 2016 deal with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Blockchain systems make it possible to keep unchangeable records of agreements, deadlines, and degrees of compliance.[46] Accountability is guaranteed, mistrust between the parties to the negotiation is decreased, and civil society is given access to real-time progress reports. In delicate post-conflict situa-

tions, the Colombian story demonstrates how digital innovation may foster credibility and confidence.

Nigeria: Community Dialogue in Plateau State

Plateau State, particularly Jos, has been deeply affected by recurring ethno-religious violence between Christian and Muslim communities from 2001 to 2021. And the recurring Herdsmen onslaught. Local peace committees in Plateau State, Nigeria, for instance, the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) based in Kaduna, in collaboration with Search for Common Ground (SFCG) and the Plateau State Peacebuilding Agency (PPBA), initiated a series of community peace dialogues and "early warning–early response" platforms. have used community conversation programs to lessen violence between farmers and herders.[47] These forums, which are backed by civil society and foreign partners, bring together women, youth, religious organisations, and traditional leaders in inclusive dialogues that resolve disputes, foster tolerance, and foster trust amongst communities.[48] In situations where state-led interventions are frequently viewed as politicised or ineffectual, the effort demonstrates the strength of grassroots ownership and dialogue-based solutions, despite ongoing hurdles.

Ogoni Peace Dialogue Process (Rivers)

The Ogoni people's conflict with oil companies (especially Shell) and the federal government over environmental degradation caused internal divisions and violence. And The Ogoni Peace Project, facilitated by the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and civil society organisations, used sustained community dialogues to reconcile warring factions and build consensus. (Boele, Fabig, & Wheeler, 2001)[49]

Tiv-Jukun Peace Dialogue (Benue and Taraba)

The Tiv and Jukun ethnic groups have clashed for decades over land, boundaries, and political representation. The Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR), with support from UNDP and local traditional leaders, facilitated multi-stakeholder dialogues from 2019 to 2021.

Farmer-Herder Mediation Forums (Benue, Nasarawa, Adamawa)

Persistent clashes between farmers and Fulani herders over land use, grazing rights, and water resources have caused widespread insecurity in central Nigeria. Mercy Corps implemented the "Conciliating Land and Natural Resource Disputes Project" (2017–2021), creating local dialogue and mediation platforms to manage disputes and strengthen cooperation.[50] Community dialogue has proven to be an effective peacebuilding tool in Nigeria's complex multi-ethnic and religious environment. These examples show that inclusive participation, local ownership, and long-term follow-up are critical to achieving lasting peace and social cohesion.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Policymakers must mainstream technology-enabled tools such as AI-powered early warning systems, geospatial mapping of conflicts, and blockchain-based accountability mechanisms into national peace and security frameworks. These innovations can complement traditional approaches by providing real-time data and predictive insights for decision-making. Nigeria's education system must integrate peace education, inter-

cultural dialogue, and digital literacy at all levels. Equipping young people with critical thinking skills will help them resist misinformation, hate speech, and extremist propaganda that proliferate online. This is especially crucial in a context where over 70% of the population is below the age of 30. International partners and local governments should prioritise climate adaptation programs, including irrigation systems, sustainable agriculture, and grazing reserves. This will reduce competition over land and water resources, which has been a major driver of farmer–herder clashes in Nigeria. Civil society organisations must leverage social media platforms not only for advocacy but also for shaping peace narratives. Campaigns that amplify stories of coexistence, inter-ethnic cooperation, and resilience can counterbalance online hate speech and propaganda that fuel violence.

Conclusion

The nature, causes, and expressions of conflict have all undergone significant change in the era of disruption. Climate stress, digital disinformation, and technical advancements that surpass governance procedures are all contributing factors to violent conflicts in Nigeria and many other regions of the world. Even though they are still useful, traditional conflict resolution models are insufficient on their own. In order to achieve sustainable peace in the twenty-first century, a paradigm shift toward inclusive, flexible, and technologically linked strategies is necessary. This includes inclusive peacebuilding that involves marginalized people, digital diplomacy to facilitate negotiations, anticipatory governance that uses big data and AI, and the development of indigenous conflict settlement procedures. The absence of conflict is no longer the only definition of peace. Instead, it needs to be viewed as an ongoing, dynamic process of transformation that flourishes in the face of uncertainty, complexity, and upheaval. How well governments, academics, civil society, and international partners work together to create a robust peace infrastructure that can handle both present crises and upcoming upheavals will determine Nigeria's route to peace.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussions in this study, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers, practitioners, scholars, and civil society actors:

i. Nigeria should adopt a hybrid approach that combines indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms (such as the palaver system, traditional councils, and inter-faith mediation) with modern technological innovations (AI-enabled early warning, digital diplomacy, and blockchain for accountability).

ii. Government agencies such as the National Orientation Agency (NOA), National Security Adviser's office, and National Peace Committee should formally integrate technology-driven tools for monitoring, predicting, and mitigating conflict. A central National PeaceTech Hub could be established to coordinate these innovations.

iii. Peace education should be mainstreamed across Nigeria's curricula at basic, secondary, and tertiary levels. Special emphasis should be placed on digital literacy, critical thinking, and ethical online engagement to curb the spread of misinformation and extremist ideologies.

iv. Federal and state governments should invest in climate-resilient agricultural practices, grazing reserves, and alternative livelihoods for youth and pastoralists. International devel-

opment partners should support climate adaptation programs that address the root causes of farmer–herder conflicts.

v. Civil society organisations and media practitioners should design strategic campaigns that amplify narratives of peace, tolerance, and coexistence, countering the dominance of hate speech and propaganda. Partnerships with influencers, artists, and community leaders can expand reach.

vi. Women, youth, and marginalised groups must be deliberately included in peace processes at local, national, and regional levels. This requires not just token participation, but real representation in decision-making structures.

vii. Regular training on digital tools, conflict-sensitive reporting, and anticipatory governance should be offered to security agencies, NGOs, and community leaders. International partnerships can provide expertise and resources.

viii. Universities and research institutes should establish peace innovation labs to test emerging technologies in conflict resolution. Findings should be translated into policy briefs to guide government action.

ix. Both government and international donors must commit to long-term funding for peacebuilding programs rather than ad hoc interventions. Establishing a National Peacebuilding Fund could ensure continuity and sustainability.

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