

POLICY BRIEF

Advancing Peace in Northern Ghana: Bridging the Gap between Policies and Community

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Northern Ghana remains a hotspot of recurring conflicts, rooted in chieftaincy disputes, land competition, ethnic rivalries and political manipulation. The persistence of these conflicts, especially in Bawku, Yendi, and Chereponi, has weakened social cohesion, undermined development, and heightened community mistrust. State capacity to respond is limited, as only 3.5% of rural localities in the north had police stations as of 2021, leaving communities vulnerable to violence and infiltration by extremist groups operating in the Sahel.

The Government of Ghana has made strides in peacebuilding through the National Peace Council, the Ministry of Chieftaincy and Religious Affairs, and alignment with continental frameworks such as the African Union's 2013 Policy Framework on Security Sector Reform. Yet these interventions remain fragmented and often fail to link high-level frameworks to grassroots realities.

This brief proposes that the Northern Intergenerational Peace Dialogues (NIPDs) serve as a vital complement to government and regional frameworks. By bridging generational divides and embedding local insights into national and continental peace strategies, NIPDs can contribute to sustainable reconciliation and strengthen Ghana's resilience against extremist threats.

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BACKGROUND

Northern Ghana has long been a hotspot for recurring conflict, largely rooted in chieftaincy disputes, land and resource competition, ethnic rivalries, and political manipulation. One of the most enduring cases is the Bawku chieftaincy conflict, a protracted dispute that started around 1951 between the Mamprusi and Kusasi ethnic groups over who holds the right to enskin a chief for the area. This conflict, which has persisted for decades and can be traced back to colonial-era divisions, has frequently erupted in violence, causing loss of lives, destruction of property, and disruption of social cohesion. Studies focusing on the Bawku Traditional Area highlight how prolonged chieftaincy conflict has bred mistrust, weakened livelihoods, caused infrastructure damage, and heightened food insecurity (Lawrence et al., 2022).

Beyond Bawku, other flashpoints such as Yendi, Chereponi, Bimbilla, and Bole have also experienced violent disputes, often centered on succession rights, land ownership, and competition over economically strategic areas. The five northern regions, though rich in culture and community resilience, are marked by recurrent ethnic and chieftaincy tensions that weaken trust and fragment communities. State response capacity is further hampered by weak institutional presence; in 2021, only 3.5% of rural localities in northern Ghana had police stations, compared to 38.4% in urban areas (GSS, 2021). This imbalance leaves many rural and border communities particularly vulnerable to recurring violence.

Today, the urgency of addressing these conflicts is heightened by regional security threats emanating from the Sahel. Violence across the Sahel has surged, with at least 7,800 civilian deaths recorded in the first seven months of 2023, a sharp increase from 2022, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). The UNDP (2023) warned that unresolved local disputes could create entry points for extremist groups operating in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (UNDP Report, 2023). A Reuters investigation (2024) further reported that jihadist groups from Burkina Faso may be using northern Ghana as a logistical and medical base (Reuters, 2024). This convergence of local conflicts and regional extremist threats makes promoting reconciliation and conflict resolution in Northern Ghana not only a domestic imperative but also a regional security priority.

PROBLEM STATEMENT



The central problem in Northern Ghana is the absence of effective, sustainable mechanisms for resolving recurring chieftaincy and ethnic conflicts, coupled with weak state presence in rural communities. While the conflicts are long-standing, what makes them acute today is the convergence of local grievances with regional insecurity dynamics. Existing interventions such as ad hoc military deployments and mediation attempts have proven insufficient, as they address symptoms of violence without tackling the structural drivers: contested traditional authority, inequitable access to land and resources, and lack of trust in state institutions.

This problem requires urgent policy attention because the stakes have shifted beyond local instability. The rise in extremist activity across the Sahel and its spillover into northern border areas increases the risk that unresolved disputes could be weaponized by external actors. Without coherent policies that link community-level peacebuilding with national frameworks and regional security strategies, Northern Ghana risks sliding into deeper insecurity – threatening not only local development but also national stability and West Africa's collective security.



EXISTING MEASURES AND ROLE OF THE GHANAIAN GOVERNMENT

In July 2025, the Government of Ghana deployed additional soldiers to the northeast following renewed clashes linked to the protracted Bawku chieftaincy dispute, which had escalated to include attacks on schools (Reuters, 2025). This came on the heels of broader regional security cooperation, where about 1,300 military personnel from 29 countries were trained in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire to strengthen preparedness against surging jihadi violence tied to al-Qaida and the Islamic State, which has destabilized much of the Sahel and displaced millions (AP, 2023). These responses, though critical for immediate security, remain largely reactive and militarized.

Beyond security deployments, Ghana has made notable institutional investments in conflict mediation and reconciliation through the National Peace Council (NPC), the House of Chiefs, and the Ministry of Chieftaincy and Religious Affairs. The NPC has spearheaded several mediation efforts in conflicts in Dagbon, Bawku, and Nanumba. The 2019 Dagbon peace accord stands out as a landmark achievement that restored relative stability after nearly two decades of chieftaincy conflict. However, other cases, such as the Bawku dispute, highlight the limitations of these interventions, where cycles of violence persist despite mediation.

At the policy level, Ghana has aligned itself with regional and continental peace frameworks, including the ECOWAS Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security and the African Union's 2013 Policy Framework on Security Sector Reform (SSR), which advocates for accountable, people-centred, and locally-owned security institutions (Union, 2013). In practice, the government has taken steps consistent with SSR principles: the Ghana Police Service established a Community Policing Unit in 2002 and has recently launched enhanced community-policing measures to deepen police-community engagement and improve local visibility (Agency, 2022). Civilian oversight mechanisms including the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), parliamentary oversight and public complaint systems contribute to accountability and human-rights protections that SSR emphasizes. The National Peace Council's mediation work and guidance on community mediation illustrate how state and traditional mechanisms are used to link governance, justice and reconciliation at the local level (Council, 2022). Nonetheless, implementation has been uneven: resource constraints, limited state presence in many northern rural localities, and the politicization of chieftaincy disputes mean that alignment with AU SSR principles has not yet fully translated into consistent security and reconciliation outcomes on the ground.

Overall, while Ghana has made significant progress in institutionalizing peace structures and aligning with regional security mechanisms, the gap lies in linking high-level aspirations to grassroots realities. This disconnect leaves Northern Ghana's conflicts not only unresolved but increasingly exposed to regional extremist infiltration, amplifying the urgency for policies and actions that bridge security, governance, and community reconciliation.





NORTHERN INTERGENERATIONAL PEACE DIALOGUES VOICES OF CONSCIENCE

ChatGPT

The Centre for Contemporary Pan-Africanism (CCPA), in collaboration with PADI Ghana, CEED Ghana, Inspire To Act, and in partnership with EMCEP, have launched the Northern Intergenerational Peace Dialogues (NIPDs). This initiative seeks to break the silos of conflict resolution interventions by convening quarterly virtual forums and an annual climax conference that foster honest, respectful, and action-oriented conversations across generations.

The goal is to:

- ✿ Deepen understanding of the historical and emerging dimensions of conflict
- ✿ Restore community trust through storytelling and shared values
- ✿ Generate practical, homegrown ideas for peacebuilding
- ✿ Create policy and community-level recommendations that can be tracked and implemented over time.

POLICY OPTIONS FOR THE NIPDS IMPLEMENTATION

The Northern Intergenerational Peace Dialogues (NIPDs) presents an innovative opportunity to complement government and regional frameworks and offers a unique opportunity to bridge the gap between high-level peace frameworks and the lived realities of communities in Northern Ghana. By convening elders, the middle generation, and youth to share experiences and generate solutions, NIPDs addresses one of the critical weaknesses of existing interventions: the absence of inclusive, intergenerational, and culturally sensitive approaches to peacebuilding. To maximize its potential, these policy options can be considered:

Integration into National Peace Infrastructure: One possible approach is to align NIPDs directly with Ghana's existing peacebuilding policies, particularly those championed by the National Peace Council (NPC) and the Ministry of Chieftaincy and Religious Affairs. This model would give NIPDs institutional recognition, ensure that its dialogue outcomes are formally considered in national policy, and strengthen accountability mechanisms. The precedent of the 2019 Dagbon Peace Accord, which emerged from a process coordinated by state and traditional authorities, illustrates how institutional backing can produce tangible results.

Yet, the risks of this model are significant. Aligning with state institutions could subject NIPDs to bureaucratic delays, political influence, or the same resource constraints that already limit the NPC's effectiveness. Communities may also perceive NIPDs as an extension of government rather than an independent platform, which could undermine trust, particularly in contexts where the state is seen as a party to disputes. Thus, while this option strengthens institutional uptake, it has to be done through a nonpartisan and transparent approach so it does not dilute grassroots legitimacy.

Linking NIPDs to Regional and Continental Frameworks: The most promising approach is to link NIPDs directly to regional and continental reconciliation frameworks, while maintaining its community-led character. In this model, NIPDs outcomes would feed into Ghana's Security Sector Reform (SSR) agenda, as well as into ECOWAS conflict prevention and mediation mechanisms and the African Union's 2013 SSR Policy Framework. This would create a multi-level system in which local voices inform not only national strategies but also regional and continental policies.

The advantages of this model are considerable. First, it enhances sustainability by situating NIPDs within broader, better-resourced frameworks. Second, it increases relevance: linking local insights to regional policy helps ensure that Ghana's response to northern insecurity is not limited to short-term firefighting but is embedded in long-term security and governance reforms. Third, this option positions Ghana as a leader in demonstrating how grassroots-driven, intergenerational dialogue can strengthen regional stability, a valuable model at a time when Sahelian insecurity threatens the entire sub-region.

Of course, challenges remain. There are numerous drawbacks to NIPDs independence from government. Without formal recognition or integration into state structures, NIPDs may struggle to influence policies or attract sustained funding. Its outputs risk being viewed as "soft" recommendations without binding weight in government planning. Moreover, in contexts where security dynamics overlap with regional extremist threats, the absence of institutional linkages could limit NIPDs' ability to address structural drivers of insecurity. Also, Coordinating across multiple levels local, national, and regional requires resources, political will, and effective monitoring mechanisms. But the potential benefits outweigh the risks. This approach ensures that NIPDs are not just series of community conversations, but a vehicle for structural change that aligns grassroots realities with the continental agenda of accountable, people-centered peacebuilding.

RECOMMENDATIONS



To ensure that conflict resolution and reconciliation efforts in Northern Ghana are effective and sustainable, this brief makes the following recommendations:

For the Government of Ghana:

- Expand police and security presence in rural communities, ensuring community oversight to build trust.
- Institutionalize intergenerational peace dialogues under the National Peace Council, with clear pathways for dialogue outcomes to shape policy.
- Provide sustained funding and technical support for locally driven peace initiatives such as the NIPDs.

For Local Communities:

- Actively engage in NIPDs to rebuild trust across generations and address cultural disputes.
- Establish and sustain community peace committees to monitor and implement dialogue outcomes.
- Partner with civil society to document and share lessons from successful reconciliation efforts.

For Regional & Continental Actors (ECOWAS, AU):

- Support NIPDs as a model for community-driven conflict resolution feeding into regional security agendas.
- Facilitate knowledge exchange between Ghanaian communities and other West African regions facing similar challenges.



CONCLUSION

The persistence of violent conflict in Northern Ghana highlights the urgent need for approaches that are inclusive, innovative, and regionally connected. While the Government of Ghana has laid important foundations through institutions like the National Peace Council and alignment with the AU's Security Sector Reform agenda, gaps remain in linking these high-level frameworks to the lived realities of northern communities.

The Northern Intergenerational Peace Dialogues provide a promising pathway to bridge this divide. By creating inclusive spaces where elders, the middle generation, and youth can collectively shape peace strategies and ensuring these insights inform national and regional policy, Ghana can chart a more sustainable course for conflict resolution and reconciliation. Embedding NIPDs within national and regional frameworks will not only reduce conflict vulnerability in Northern Ghana but also tackle the increasing exposure to regional extremist infiltration.

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