ISSN (E): ***2959-0272***

ISSN (P): ***2710-0502***

Volume **7** Issue **1** Year **2026**

DOI: https://doi.org/10.59111/JPD.007.001.0187

Pathways to Stability: Rethinking Alternative Dispute Resolution and Conflict Prevention Management in the Horn of Africa

Kathryn Langat

Researcher-Horn of Africa

Corresponding author e-mail: [1]* kathylangat@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the role of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) and Conflict Prevention, Management, and Resolution (CPMR) in promoting sustainable peace and justice in the Horn of Africa, situating them within both indigenous traditions and contemporary innovations. Drawing on a qualitative comparative analysis of Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, South Sudan, and lessons from Rwanda, the study finds that while community-based mechanisms remain central to everyday justice, their effectiveness depends on institutional recognition, safeguards for rights, and integration with formal judicial systems. Rwanda's Abunzi and Kenya's Alternative Justice Systems (AJS) demonstrate the potential for scaling localized mediation through state support, while Somalia's ADR centres illustrate the promise of people-centered justice despite gaps in inclusivity. The Moyale cross-border CPMR initiative highlights the importance of regional cooperation in addressing pastoralist conflicts that transcend national boundaries. Findings reveal that legitimacy alone is insufficient unless accompanied by enforceability, inclusivity, and rapid linkages to early warning systems like CEWARN. Recommendations stress the need for standardization of ADR practices, survivor-centered safeguards, cross-border frameworks, and technology-driven innovations such as Online Dispute Resolution (ODR). The study concludes that by blending indigenous wisdom with modern institutional support, the Horn of Africa can transition from fragmented approaches to a coherent justice architecture capable of preventing conflict and fostering long-term stability.

Keywords: Alternative Dispute Resolution, Conflict Prevention, Horn of Africa, Mediation, Peacebuilding

1.0 Background

The Horn of Africa Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan, with lessons also from Rwanda has long been defined by cyclical violence, state fragility, and cross-border conflicts[1]. Drivers include political instability, ethnic tensions, competition over grazing and water resources, climate variability, and porous borders[2]. Formal justice systems often remain centralized and inaccessible, particularly in rural and pastoralist areas, leading communities to rely on customary dispute resolution led by elders, chiefs, and clan councils[3].

While indigenous systems have legitimacy, they face challenges in rights protection, enforceability, and inclusion of women and youth. This has spurred interest in new tools: formalized Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) centers, state-recognized Alternative Justice Systems (AJS) policies, and Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution (CPMR) frameworks supported by regional organizations such as IGAD's CEWARN early-warning system (IDLO, 2024a; UNODC, 2020). Rwanda's Abunzi mediation committees and Somalia's ADR centers demonstrate that hybridized models can deliver fast, low-cost justice while maintaining community legitimacy (Mutisi, 2012; IDLO, 2024b).

Rwanda illustrates how state recognition and resourcing can scale community justice: Gacaca (for post-genocide accountability) and Abunzi mediation committees (for everyday civil disputes) embedded reconciliatory practices into law and routine access to justice[4]. In Somalia, ADR Centers formalize customary forums, clearing thousands of cases at low unit cost while

---

[1] IGAD. (2024b). *Annual report 2023*. https://igad.int/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Annual-Report-2023-Final-Final-signed-8th-07-2024.pdf

[2] International Peace Institute. (2010). *Preventing conflicts in Africa: Early warning and response*. https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/ipi_e_pub_preventing_conflicts.pdf

[3] Shiferaw, R. M. (2024). Indigenous conflict management practices in Ethiopia: A systematic review. *Cogent Social Sciences*, *10*(1), 2327122. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2024.2327122

[4] Mutabazi, P. (2025). *Community justice and mediation in Rwanda: The evolution of Abunzi committees*. Kigali: Rwanda Justice Commission

working toward due-process safeguards (IDLO, 2021, 2023; 2024a). In Kenya, the Alternative Justice Systems (AJS) Policy integrates traditional and informal mechanisms with the judiciary, an approach now reflected in national justice reporting (UNODC, 2020; McConkie, 2024) South Sudan's chiefs' courts remain the main venue for everyday disputes; new policy efforts seek to reform customary justice and curb harmful practices (Almeida et al., 2024; ICTJ, 2024; IOM, 2025).

These insights justify the need to strengthen Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) and Conflict Prevention, Management, and Resolution (CPMR) as integrated tools to address structural weaknesses in both formal and customary systems.

1.2 Objectives

1. To examine how ADR and CPMR mechanisms are currently used in the Horn of Africa.
2. To assess their effectiveness in preventing escalation of local disputes into violent conflicts.
3. To identify best practices and propose policy recommendations for scaling and institutionalizing ADR and CPMR

2.0 Literature Review

While traditional ADR remains culturally resonant, the complexity of modern conflicts in the Horn cross-border migration, pastoralist competition, GBV, political disputes demands integration with CPMR:

2.1 Customary justice as the backbone and its dilemmas

Research across the Horn of Africa consistently finds that customary authorities elders, clan fora, chiefs' courts deliver most everyday justice, prized for speed, proximity, and social repair. Jackson (2023) synthesizes how these authorities have become central to security and justice interventions in the Horn and proposes engagement models that recognize their legitimacy while acknowledging dilemmas such as elite capture, gender exclusion, weak procedural safeguards.

A systematic review by Shiferaw (2024) on indigenous conflict management in Ethiopia similarly concludes that mechanisms such as Jaarsummaa are culturally resonant and effective at restoring relationships, yet outcomes are unevenly documented and rarely integrated with state enforcement making durability and rights protection variable[5].

Much of the literature celebrates legitimacy and access, but offers limited, comparable outcome metrics e.g., recurrence rates, compliance at 6–12 months and often notes weak or adhoc links to formal courts. Jackson's call for structured engagement with customary authorities underscores this evidence gap[6].

2.2 Institutional ADR and people-centred justice

Where customary practice is institutionalized through policy, centers, or court linkages, evidence shows scale of improvement. In Somalia, IDLO's multi-year support to ADR centres demonstrates high caseload resolution and strong user uptake; yet impact briefs flag shortfalls in

[5] Shiferaw, R. M. (2024). Indigenous conflict management practices in Ethiopia: A systematic literature review. *Cogent Social Sciences, 10*(1), 2327122. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2024.2327122

[6] Jackson, P. (2023). Whose security? Whose justice? Customary authorities in security and justice interventions in the Horn of Africa. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development, 18*(3), 261–278. https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2023.2283553

GBV referral, protection and inclusion that require standard operating procedures and monitoring[7]. In Kenya, the Alternative Justice Systems (AJS) Policy formalizes non-state justice and referral pathways with the judiciary; UNODC's foundational policy documents and subsequent analyses detail how administrative recognition boosts enforceability and data visibility[8]. On the rights to safeguards in plural systems. the scholarship and practitioner reports agree that institutional ADR helps but they also show inconsistent survivor centred protocols especially for GBV and children's cases, and variable due process across forums without clear "red-line" referrals to courts[9].

2.3 CPMR architectures: early warning still needs faster hand-offs

At regional level, IGAD's CEWARN monitors five human-security sectors namely economy, social, governance, security, environment and supports cross-border prevention platforms in Moyale cluster. This institutional CPMR backbone is widely cited as good practice. Still, policy syntheses note that alerts do not reliably trigger time bound mediation or resource-sharing deals unless specific local architectures exist[10]. Literature on early warning in the Horn of Africa applauds monitoring coverage but is thinner on operational timelines that convert high-risk alerts into convened mediations within days leaving a prevention gap the ADR ecosystem could fill with clear protocols.

2.4 Rwanda's routinized community justice transferable lessons

Rwanda offers a dual track: transitional justice Gacaca, historically and routinized everyday mediation via Abunzi committees, now embedded by policy and capacity strategies

---

[7] IDLO. (2024). *Inclusive practices in alternative dispute resolution: Delivering people-centred justice in Somalia* (PDF). https://www.idlo.int/sites/default/files/2024/publications/documents/somalia_adr_centre_issue_brief.pd

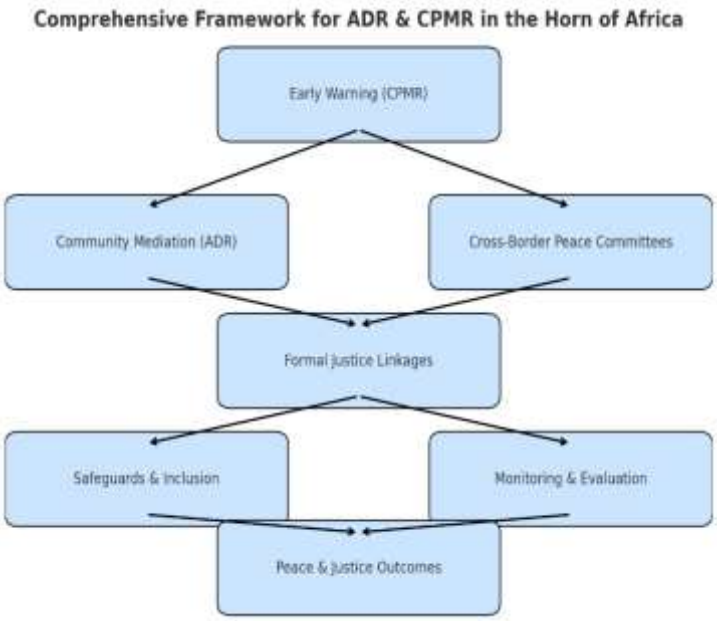
[8] UNODC. (2020). *Policy framework for Alternative Justice Systems in Kenya.* https://www.unodc.org/documents/easternafrica/Criminal%20Justice/AJS_Policy_Framework_2020_Kenya.pdf

[9] McConkie, D. S., Jr. (2024). Promoting and reforming Kenya's customary justice through AJS. *Emory International Law Review, 38*, 821–874. https://scholarlycommons.law.emory.edu/eilr/1327

[10] IGAD. (2024c). *IGAD establishes local migration network in Moyale*. https://igad.int/igad-establishes-local-migration-network-in-moyale

under MINIJUST. Government policy documents ADR Policy: Abunzi Capacity Building Strategy and independent evaluations show standardized structures, training, and supervision that many in the Horn of Africa programs lack; the literature treats Rwanda as a transferable model for scaling while maintaining local legitimacy[11]. Compared to Rwanda's standardized, nationwide approach, many initiatives in the Horn of Africa remain projectized and fragmented, with duplication and uneven minimum standards across local forums.

2.5 Conceptual Framework



The visual conceptual framework is for ADR and CPMR in the Horn of Africa. It shows how Early Warning systems (CPMR) feed into Community Mediation and Cross-Border Committees, which then link to Formal Justice systems. Safeguards, inclusivity, and monitoring ensure that outcomes translate into peace and justice.

[11] Mutisi, M. (2012). *Local conflict resolution in Rwanda: The case of Abunzi mediators*. ACCORD. https://www.accord.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Monograph-July-2012-Local-conflict-resolution-in-Rwanda-The-case-of-abunzi-mediators.pd

3.0 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative comparative case study approach combined with a desk-based literature review. This methodology has been widely used by other scholars analyzing peacebuilding and justice systems in Africa for example, Mutisi (2012) used a case study approach to assess Rwanda's Abunzi mediators, showing how community-based justice builds legitimacy. Jackson (2023) conducted qualitative analysis of customary authorities in the Horn, underscoring their role in security and justice. Shiferaw (2024) applied a systematic literature review to map indigenous conflict management in Ethiopia, highlighting strengths and gaps across multiple ethnic groups. The methodology was appropriate because it provides contextual depth, comparative insight, and policy relevance. It allowed the study to integrate multiple perspectives, identify gaps, and highlight best practices across the Horn of Africa and Rwanda. By building on established scholarly approaches, the study ensures methodological rigor while responding to the practical realities of conflict prevention research in complex and diverse environments[12].

4.0 Results and Discussion

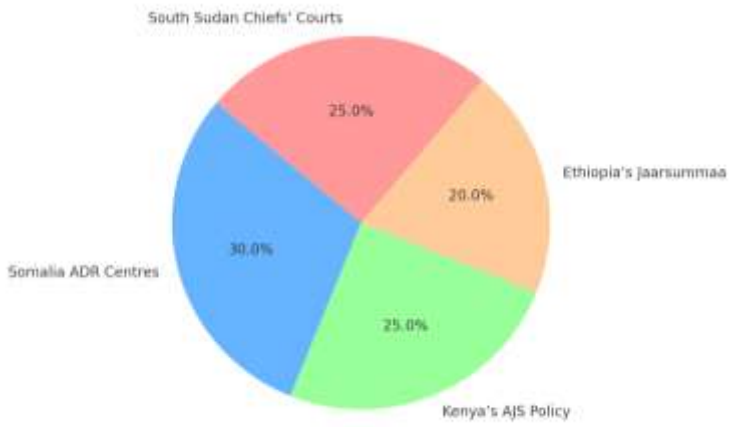
This section presents the results of the study and a critical discussion of the findings, organized around the three research objectives. Structuring the analysis in this way ensures clarity and flow, while allowing for direct linkage between the study's aims, the evidence gathered, and the implications for practice.

Under objective one, it highlights that ADR is deeply embedded in the Horn of Africa societies, but its effectiveness depends on the degree of institutional recognition and rights protection. Countries like Kenya are moving toward formal integration, while Ethiopia and South Sudan remain reliant on customary legitimacy without robust state backing. Somalia represents a

[12] Haguruka. (2022). *ADR community-led assessment (Rwanda).* https://haguruka.org.rw/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/ADR-Community-Led-Assessment.pdf

hybrid, where donor-supported ADR centres demonstrate high throughput but struggle with inclusivity for examples, in Somalia ADR Centres, the Institutional ADR resolved 5,433 cases in 15 months across 15 centers. These forums are popular because they are accessible, low-cost, and culturally legitimate, but gaps exist in gender-sensitive case handling and GBV referrals[13].

In Kenya's Alternative Justice Systems (AJS) Policy, the judiciary has formalized customary dispute resolution by creating legal pathways for registration and oversight of community-based outcomes (UNODC, 2020). This enhances enforceability and trust, though harmonization with statutory courts is ongoing[14]. Similarly, in Ethiopia's Jaarsummaa: Elders' reconciliation (araara) effectively resolves local land and family disputes, but settlements often lack recognition in state courts[15]. South Sudan Chiefs' Courts remain dominant for everyday disputes but face criticism over harmful practices and gender bias, prompting reform initiatives (ICTJ, 2024; IOM, 2025).



[13] IDLO. (2024, April 30). *Inclusive practices in alternative dispute resolution: Delivering people-centred justice in Somalia (Issue brief).* https://www.idlo.int/publications/inclusive-practices-alternative-dispute-resolution-delivering-people-centred-justice

[14] UNODC. (2020). *Policy framework for Alternative Justice Systems in Kenya.* https://www.unodc.org/documents/easternafrica/Criminal%20Justice/AJS_Policy_Framework_2020_Kenya.pdf

[15] Roba, D. A. (2024). Jaarsa Biyyaa and Jaarsummaa among the Arsi Oromo. *African Journal on Conflict Resolution, 24*(1). https://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2309-737X2024000100004

Source: Researcher, 2025

Figure one shows Somalia ADR Centres as having the largest emphasis due to their widespread use and documented caseloads. Kenya and South Sudan follow closely, each with institutional relevance and challenges. Ethiopia contributes significantly but with weaker due to lack of legal backing.

4.1 Effectiveness of CPMR in preventing escalation of local disputes into violent conflicts

This study established that, CPMR mechanisms are effective at reducing escalation of conflicts were linked to local mediation structures. Rwanda demonstrates routinization, while Moyale shows the value of cross-border committees. For instance, Moyale Cross-Border Peace Committees in the border of Ethiopia and Kenya, IGAD-CEWARN supported the establishment of a 25-member peace committee and local migration networks. These mechanisms helped de-escalate pastoralist conflicts by addressing disputes early and facilitating cross-border peace cooperation[16]. While IGAD CEWARN it generates timely alerts in five sectors namely economic. Security, social, environmental and governance, scholars note delays in linking warnings to rapid mediation responses (IGAD, 2024). Literature on early warning in the Horn applauds monitoring coverage but is thinner on operational timelines that convert high-risk alerts into convened mediations within days leaving a prevention gap the ADR ecosystem could fill with clear protocols[17].

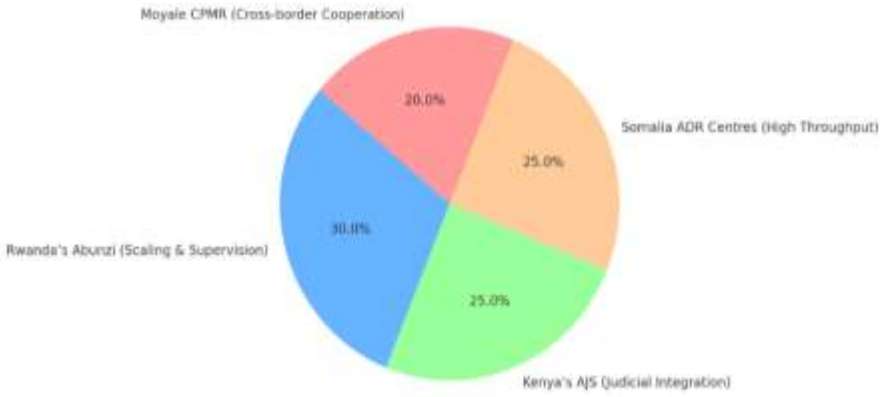
[16] GIZ. (2025). *Strengthening cross-border conflict prevention and peacebuilding in the Horn of Africa*. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

[17] IGAD. (2024b). *Annual report 2023*. https://igad.int/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Annual-Report-2023-Final-Final-signed-8th-07-2024.pdf

4.2 Best practices and policy recommendations for scaling and institutionalizing ADR and CPMR

This section highlights best practices and emerging models of ADR and CPMR across Africa, with a focus on their relevance to the Horn. Rwanda's *Abunzi* committees showcase how state-backed standardization can achieve nationwide mediation. Kenya's AJS policy demonstrates effective integration of informal justice with the judiciary to strengthen enforceability. Somalia's ADR centres and Moyale's cross-border CPMR initiatives illustrate evolving approaches that, while still facing gaps in rights safeguards, show promise for enhancing community resilience and preventive diplomacy[18].

The pie chart Figure 2 highlights the relative distribution of ADR & CPMR best practices in the Horn of Africa with Rwanda as a comparative case. Rwanda's Abunzi (30%): Demonstrates nationwide scaling with training and supervision while Kenya's AJS (25%): Shows strong judicial integration, boosting enforceability. Somalia ADR Centres (25%): High throughput in resolving disputes, but gaps in rights safeguards. Lastly, Moyale CPMR (20%): Effective cross-border collaboration in conflict prevention.



[18] IDLO. (2024). *Inclusive practices in alternative dispute resolution: Delivering people-centred justice in Somalia* (PDF). https://www.i

Source: Researcher, 2025

It can be concluded that Figure 2 pie chart emphasizes Rwanda's Abunzi as the strongest institutionalized model, followed closely by Kenya's AJS and Somalia's ADR centres. Moyale CPMR, though smaller in scale, is critical for addressing cross-border conflicts, making it highly significant despite a smaller share. Scaling requires not just replication of forums but also standardization, state recognition, and integration with regional early-warning systems. Rwanda and Kenya show what is possible with strong policy frameworks, while Somalia and Ethiopia illustrate ongoing challenges in rights protection and enforceability.

5.0 Key Findings

- ADR and CPMR are widely practiced across the Horn but remain fragmented and unevenly institutionalized.
- Customary legitimacy ensures accessibility and trust, but gaps persist in enforceability, gender inclusion, and rights protection.
- Institutional frameworks (Kenya AJS, Rwanda Abunzi) demonstrate that scaling is possible with state recognition and oversight.
- CPMR mechanisms (CEWARN, Moyale committees) help prevent escalation of conflicts but require faster "warning-to-mediation" hand-offs.
- Regional cooperation is vital in cross-border pastoralist zones where disputes frequently spill across national boundaries.

6.0 Recommendations

- Legal Integration by recognizing ADR outcomes in national laws, with appellate oversight for fairness and rights compliance.

- Safeguarding mandate referral pathways for GBV and child-related disputes; train mediators in survivor-centered practices.
- Develop national ADR standards for mediator training, case documentation, and monitoring drawing on Rwanda's Abunzi model.
- Establish Cross-Border Frameworks for example Establish bilateral MoUs between Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia for recognition of ADR outcomes and shared mediator rosters.
- Linkage to Early Warning and early response by creating service-level agreements within CEWARN that require convening mediation within seven to ten days of high-risk alerts.
- Inclusivity for women and youth participation in peace committees and ADR forums.
- Need for metrics outcomes to move beyond outputs to measure recurrence rates, compliance, and user satisfaction in annual justice reporting.
- Fund ADR centers and committees sustainably, linking resources to performance on outcomes and inclusion.

7.0 Conclusion

The study has demonstrated that Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) and Conflict Prevention, Management, and Resolution (CPMR) are not only deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of the Horn of Africa but are also critical to shaping the region's future stability. Across Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, and South Sudan, customary and community-driven mechanisms continue to provide accessible justice, yet their effectiveness varies depending on the degree of institutional support, rights safeguards, and integration with formal systems. Rwanda's routinized Abunzi committees and Kenya's AJS framework stand out as models of how local legitimacy can be scaled through state recognition and policy backing, while Somalia's ADR centres and cross-border CPMR in Moyale highlight the promise of innovation and regional collaboration.

The findings underscore a central message: legitimacy alone is not enough. For ADR and CPMR to prevent conflict and sustain peace, they must be strengthened by legal enforceability, inclusivity, and rapid response linkages to early warning systems. This requires political will, sustained investment, and coordinated regional action under IGAD and similar platforms.

Ultimately, ADR and CPMR offer the Horn of Africa an opportunity to move from fragmented, project-based interventions to a coherent and preventive justice architecture. By drawing on indigenous wisdom, adopting proven models, and embracing innovations such as online dispute resolution, the region can establish itself as a leader in peacebuilding. If fully realized, these mechanisms will not only address immediate disputes but also lay the foundations for long-term stability, economic growth, and social harmony in the Horn and beyond.