Local Governance, Institutional Trust and Conflict Prevention in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique

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Abstract

Since October 2017, the province of Cabo Delgado, in northern Mozambique, has faced a prolonged insurgency that has already displaced more than one million people and exposed deep fragilities in the relationship between the state and local communities. Much of the political and academic response has focused on military and security interventions, but a growing body of literature suggests that the erosion of institutional trust and the absence of effective local governance may contribute to the persistence of the conflict, rather than merely being its consequence. This study examines, through qualitative documentary analysis of secondary sources, the relationship between local governance, institutional trust, and conflict prevention in Cabo Delgado. Anchored in Börzel and Risse's theory of governance in areas of limited statehood and in the institutional literature on political trust, the study argues that institutional trust functions as a constitutive element, rather than a by-product, of effective governance, and that interventions focused exclusively on security may deepen rather than reduce the trust deficit. The evidence suggests that local dialogue initiatives with communal, religious, and traditional legitimacy have shown signs of institutionalizing trust at the community level, albeit on a smaller geographic scale, and that the most recent spikes in displacement, including the 2025 wave, remain associated with deficits in sustained administrative presence. The study concludes with policy recommendations oriented toward a stabilization approach centred on local governance, alongside conventional security responses rather than subordinate to them.

Key Words: *local governance; institutional trust; conflict prevention; Cabo Delgado; limited statehood; traditional authority*

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Cabo Delgado, the northernmost province of Mozambique, has been experiencing a sustained armed conflict since October 2017, when a non-state armed group ideologically linked to the Islamic State launched its first attacks in the district of Mocímboa da Praia. What began as a localized insurgency has evolved into one of the longest-running and least understood conflicts in Southern Africa, with substantial humanitarian impact in terms of forced displacement, infrastructure destruction, and disruption of livelihoods (Ntaka, 2023). More than one million people have been displaced since the onset of the insurgency, and violence intensified again throughout 2025 (OCHA, 2025b). The conflict has also affected the development of natural gas exploration projects in the region and has worsened food insecurity among a population already marked by historical marginalization.

1.2. Research Problem

Much of the international response to the Cabo Delgado crisis has prioritized military and counterinsurgency solutions, through regional missions, the deployment of foreign forces, and the reinforcement of the Mozambican Armed Defence Forces (FADM). However, a recurring theme in the literature is that the conflict is not merely a security problem: it has roots in long-standing governance failures, a weak and inconsistent state presence, and deeply entrenched distrust between local communities and the institutions meant to serve them (Ntaka, 2023; Neethling, 2021a). This raises the central research problem of this study: to what extent does the quality of local governance, and the level of institutional trust it generates, shape the trajectory of conflict prevention in Cabo Delgado?

1.3. Objectives

The overall objective of this study is to examine the relationship between local governance, institutional trust, and conflict prevention in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1) characterize the governance deficits that have historically shaped state-society relations in the province; (2) assess the role of institutional trust as a constitutive element of effective governance in contexts of limited statehood; (3) examine the place of traditional authority in the architecture of Mozambican local governance and its relevance to conflict prevention; (4) identify and analyse local dialogue and peacebuilding initiatives already documented; and (5) draw conclusions relevant to public policy on strengthening local governance as a pathway to sustainable conflict prevention.

1.4. Relevance of the Study

Dominant theories of institutional trust have mostly been developed from the context of stable Western democracies or transitioning post-communist societies, leaving it unclear how these mechanisms operate in fragile African contexts marked simultaneously by active armed conflict and by plural systems of state and traditional authority. Cabo Delgado offers a critical case through which to examine and extend this literature, with direct relevance for public policy in a conflict that remains active and whose intensity worsened again in 2025.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Local Governance and Limited Statehood in Cabo Delgado

The literature on governance in fragile states offers a concept particularly well suited to the case of Cabo Delgado: that of areas of limited statehood, developed by Tanja Börzel and Thomas Risse. From this perspective, an area of limited statehood is not an ungoverned or ungovernable space, but rather one in which the central authority lacks the capacity to hierarchically impose and enforce collectively binding rules and to maintain an effective monopoly on the use of force; this does not preclude the emergence of other forms of governance, exercised jointly by state and non-state actors (Börzel & Risse, 2010). Applying this concept directly to northern Mozambique, Neethling (2021a) describes Cabo Delgado as a case of “sovereignty at half-mast,” in which the central government based in Maputo is unable to effectively impose or enact policy in the province, a deficit that produces gaps in legitimacy and administrative capacity that predate the insurgency itself.

This reading is corroborated by analyses of the insurgency as a symptom of governance failure: the region is marked by a historical pattern of north-south division, inequality, weak public service provision, and uneven economic development, conditions that, according to Ntaka (2023), left the country vulnerable to exploitation of the insurgency by armed groups. The same study argues that the Mozambican state’s inability to facilitate an inclusive democracy in the post-civil-war period, and to provide public goods and an environment conducive to improving people’s lives, constitutes in itself a form of governance failure distinct from mere military weakness vis-à-vis the insurgents.

2.2. Institutional Trust as a Constitutive Element of Governance

A second central theoretical contribution is to treat social trust not as an incidental outcome of good governance, but as one of its constitutive conditions, alongside institutional design and legitimacy, which interact in a causally complex and multidirectional way to produce effective governance in contexts of limited statehood (Börzel & Risse, 2021). This approach has an advantage over models of institutional trust built from stable Western democracies: it explicitly recognizes that, in fragile contexts, trust in institutions cannot be treated as a given starting point, but rather as something that must be built through governance arrangements perceived as legitimate by citizens themselves.

This idea resonates with the classic literature on political institutions and generalized trust, according to which citizens' trust in institutions depends largely on perceptions of the impartiality and performance of those same institutions (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). Mishler and Rose (2001), in a comparative study of post-communist societies, offer a particularly relevant complementary contribution for contexts of accelerated institutional transformation: their findings show that institutional explanations, that is, those based on citizens' assessment of institutions' actual performance, have greater explanatory power than cultural explanations based on inherited predispositions, especially at the micro, individual level. Applied to Cabo Delgado, this finding suggests that the trust deficit among local communities should not be read as a fixed cultural trait, but rather as an updatable response to concrete experiences of institutional performance, which implies that this trust could, in principle, be rebuilt through real and sustained changes in how local institutions operate.

Applied to Cabo Delgado, this literature helps explain why the mere presence of national or foreign security forces may not, on its own, be sufficient to reduce communities' vulnerability to radicalization: without a perception of legitimacy and responsive administrative capacity, the deployment of forces could even deepen the very trust deficit it was meant to close.

2.3. Traditional Authority and Governance Pluralism in Mozambique

A third theoretical strand, less explored in the literature specific to Cabo Delgado but relevant to understanding the architecture of Mozambican local governance, concerns the place of traditional authority in the post-colonial state. After independence in 1975, FRELIMO's socialist government formally abolished traditional chieftaincies and replaced them with new party-based governance structures, in a deliberate attempt at modernization and political centralization (Meneses, 2005). This process produced a

lasting rupture between the state's formal authority and the structures of legitimacy recognized at the level of rural communities, many of which continued to rely on régulos, councils of elders, and other customary authority figures for conflict resolution and the organization of community life, regardless of their legal status (Meneses, 2005).

From the 1990s onward, and especially after Law No. 8/2000, the Mozambican state sought to partially reintegrate traditional authorities into the architecture of local governance, in a process that Buur and Kyed (2007) describe as the creation of a "legible space" between the state and the community, that is, a mechanism through which the central state attempts to render local authority structures visible, categorizable, and, to some extent, governable from Maputo, without granting them full political autonomy. This partial and ambiguous recognition has potentially significant implications for the discussion of institutional trust in Cabo Delgado: in areas where traditional authority retains recognized social legitimacy but lacks full formal recognition or the resources to act, a governance void can form that neither the central state nor customary structures can fill on their own, a type of gap that the literature on limited statehood associates with the emergence of alternative governance, including, in the case of Cabo Delgado, governance imposed by non-state armed groups in territory under their control.

2.4. Local Governance and Peacebuilding Initiatives

Unlike interventions focused exclusively on security, some local-level initiatives in Cabo Delgado have sought to act directly on the trust deficit identified in the preceding sections. In January 2022, Christian and Muslim leaders met in Pemba and signed the Pemba Inter-Religious Declaration, a fifteen-point document rejecting any association between religion and extremist violence and committing to cooperate in promoting reconciliation (ACI Africa, 2022; Vatican News, 2022). The following month, the Peacemaking Advisory Group (PAG) was established, chaired by Bishop Trevor Mwamba, with an explicit mandate to begin closing the trust deficit in Cabo Delgado by creating a non-partisan platform for dialogue between state and non-state actors at the national, provincial, and local levels (ACCORD, 2022).

In parallel, the International Growth Centre documents the role of the Northern Integrated Development Agency (ADIN), established in 2020, and of inter-religious radio campaigns that brought together Muslim and Christian leaders to broadcast a joint message of peace and fraternity in Pemba: initiatives that, according to provincial

government officials involved, helped extend public intervention beyond the areas directly affected by the conflict (International Growth Centre, 2025). These initiatives share a common feature that distinguishes them from security interventions: they draw on structures of religious and communal authority already recognized as legitimate by local populations, rather than attempting to impose legitimacy from a central or foreign authority.

2.5. Natural Gas Discovery and Economic Exclusion

A fourth recurring factor in the literature on the roots of the conflict is the discovery, from 2010 onward, of offshore natural gas reserves in the Rovuma Basin, off the coast of Cabo Delgado, one of the largest natural gas finds in the world, with projects led by consortia including Anadarko (later acquired by TotalEnergies), ENI, and ExxonMobil, valued at tens of billions of dollars (Neethling, 2021b). Although the discovery was initially welcomed as a development opportunity for one of Mozambique's poorest regions, the literature reviewed consistently points to the absence of visible material benefits for local communities: according to a report by Anadarko itself cited in this literature, more than 550 families had to be physically resettled and around 952 lost access to their farmland to make way for the liquefied natural gas project's infrastructure (Al Jazeera, 2020).

This combination of resource wealth concentrated in large-scale international projects, on the one hand, and forced displacement and economic exclusion of host communities, on the other, is identified in the literature as an additional factor eroding institutional trust, distinct from, but overlapping with, the governance and security deficits already discussed, and reinforcing a perception, already present among communities before the gas discovery, that the state and its international partners act in the interest of parties other than the local population (Neethling, 2021b). This factor links directly to the theoretical framework of limited statehood: in gas-exploration areas, the presence of the state and concessionary companies is, in terms of infrastructure and investment, comparatively high, yet the perceived legitimacy of that presence among host communities remains low, consistent with the distinction between material capacity and legitimacy underscored by Börzel and Risse (2021).

2.6. Gap in the Literature

Despite substantial documentation of conflict dynamics in Cabo Delgado, of governance theory in areas of limited statehood more generally, and of the place of

traditional authority in the Mozambican state, there is little academic synthesis that explicitly traces the relationship between local governance deficits, institutional trust, and conflict prevention outcomes, applied specifically to the case of Cabo Delgado and systematically integrating these three bodies of literature. This study seeks to contribute to that gap.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Design

This is a qualitative study based on documentary analysis of secondary sources, an approach justified by the security constraints that currently limit primary data collection in the province.

3.2. Data Sources

Sources include reports from regional and international organizations with documented work on Cabo Delgado, humanitarian bulletins from OCHA and IOM, peer-reviewed academic literature on governance in areas of limited statehood and on traditional authority in Mozambique, and publicly available records of dialogue and peacebuilding initiatives in the province.

3.3. Analytical Procedure

Source search and selection took place between 2024 and September 2026, prioritizing publications from the last five years for data on conflict dynamics, with no time limit for foundational theoretical literature (governance in limited statehood, institutional trust, traditional authority). Sources were included if they met at least one of three criteria: (a) origin from international or regional bodies with a recognized humanitarian or governance mandate (OCHA, IOM, ACCORD, UNDP); (b) publication in peer-reviewed academic journals; (c) direct and verifiable documentation of local dialogue or peacebuilding initiatives. Sources without clear attribution of authorship or institutional origin, and opinions not grounded in verifiable data, were excluded.

The content of the sources was organized thematically around four central constructs, defined a priori from the theoretical framework: quality of local governance, institutional trust, pluralism of authority (state, traditional, and religious), and peacebuilding initiatives. Each source was read in full, and relevant excerpts were manually coded under one or more of these four themes, allowing recurring patterns,

points of convergence, and any factual contradictions to be identified through comparison across sources.

3.4. Triangulation and Source Verification

Given the risk of factual imprecision in contexts of active conflict, where humanitarian data change rapidly and are not always consistent across sources, the author sought to triangulate displacement statistics and specific events across at least two independent sources, favouring the primary institutional source (OCHA, IOM) over journalistic coverage reporting on those same agencies whenever possible. Where a figure could not be confirmed through more than one source, this limitation is explicitly flagged in the text.

3.5. Data Availability

The data underlying this study consist exclusively of publicly available secondary sources. The author commits to retaining complete records of the sources consulted, including URLs, DOIs, and access dates, for a minimum period of five years after publication, and to making them available to editors upon reasonable request.

4. Results

4.1. Patterns of Institutional Trust Deficit

The evidence reviewed consistently identifies a pre-existing trust deficit between the population of Cabo Delgado and state institutions, both central and local, rooted in perceptions of long-term marginalization and historical inequalities in access to resources and public services (Ntaka, 2023; Neethling, 2021a). This deficit does not appear uniform across the province: the sources reviewed suggest an association between historically weaker administrative presence and greater vulnerability to recruitment and territorial control by non-state armed groups. The literature on traditional authority adds a further layer to this pattern: in areas where formal recognition of traditional structures is weaker or more contested, the legitimacy void between the central state and the community tends, according to this literature, to be more pronounced (Meneses, 2005; Buur & Kyed, 2007), which is consistent with the vulnerability patterns documented for Cabo Delgado.

4.2. Displacement as an Indicator of Governance and Security Failure

The conflict has produced large-scale forced displacement since 2017, with more than

one million people cumulatively displaced (OCHA, 2025b). Violence intensified significantly again in 2025: between 20 and 28 July of that year, attacks by armed groups in the districts of Chiúre, Ancuabe, and Muidumbe caused, according to IOM/DTM data cited by OCHA, the displacement of at least 46,667 people in eight days, of whom more than 42,000 were in Chiúre district alone, with an unusually high proportion of children (OCHA, 2025a). Since January 2025, more than 95,000 people have fled insecurity in Cabo Delgado, according to the same source (OCHA, 2025a). In September 2025, OCHA reported that violence against civilians was on track to reach a record for the year, with 519 attacks recorded through the end of August, compared with 448 for the whole of 2022, and more than 20,000 people displaced in the weeks leading up to 24 September alone (OCHA, 2025b).

These recurring spikes are associated, according to the humanitarian reports consulted, with periods when the state and allied security presence withdrew or relocated, which is consistent with the hypothesis that a weak, sustained governance presence contributes to renewed community vulnerability, although the documentary sources do not allow this factor to be isolated from the military capacity of the armed groups themselves. OCHA reports further highlight that the 2025 humanitarian response was severely underfunded, with only about 19% of the United Nations Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan for Mozambique funded by July of that year, which, according to the same source, deepens the perception of institutional abandonment among affected communities (OCHA, 2025c).

4.3. Divergent Outcomes Between Security-Centred and Governance-Centred Interventions

Security-centred interventions show mixed results in the sources reviewed: national force deployments are associated, in some accounts, with heightened local distrust, while foreign regional forces were, in some cases, comparatively better received. By contrast, sources reviewed on local governance- and trust-centred interventions report more consistent results in institutionalizing conflict prevention at the community level. The Pemba Inter-Religious Declaration, signed in January 2022, and the Peacemaking Advisory Group, established in February of the same year with an explicit mandate to close the trust deficit through non-partisan dialogue between state and non-state actors (ACCORD, 2022), are documented in the sources reviewed as having produced forms of institutionalized trust at the community level, albeit on a much smaller geographic scale than the conflict itself.

4.4. The Place of Traditional Authority in the Local Response

It is important to note that the sources reviewed on traditional authority in Mozambique do not focus directly on Cabo Delgado; what follows is therefore a theoretical inference rather than an empirical finding specific to the province. The partial and ambiguous recognition of traditional structures since Law No. 8/2000, described by Buur and Kyed (2007) as the creation of a “legible” but not fully autonomous space between state and community, suggests, by extension, that these structures, where they exist and retain social legitimacy, could constitute an underused governance resource within the conflict prevention strategies currently documented for the province. This reading is compatible with the broader pattern identified in section 4.3, in which the initiatives with the greatest institutionalization of trust are precisely those that draw on authority structures already legitimized locally, but it cannot be treated as direct confirmation, given the absence of sources specific to traditional authority in Cabo Delgado.

4.5. Exclusion from the Benefits of Natural Gas Extraction

The sources reviewed on the natural gas industry in Cabo Delgado document an absence of visible material benefits for local populations, despite the large amounts of investment involved, and link this absence to processes of resettlement and loss of access to farmland in communities near the project’s infrastructure (Al Jazeera, 2020; Neethling, 2021b). This finding is consistent with the pattern identified in the preceding sections: the presence of material capacity and investment, on its own, does not appear to translate into institutional trust when it is not accompanied by a distribution of benefits perceived as equitable.

4.6. Local Governance as a Differentiating Factor

Taken together, the results suggest that districts and communities where local governance structures retain some degree of legitimacy and responsiveness appear, in the sources reviewed, to show greater resilience to destabilization, while areas marked by historical marginalization, economic exclusion, and weak institutional presence consistently appear as the most vulnerable to recruitment and violence (Ntaka, 2023). The most recent 2025 displacement data indicate that this vulnerability remains active and, according to OCHA reports, tends to worsen alongside the reduction in international humanitarian funding available for the response in the province.

5. Discussion

5.1. Interpreting the Results in Light of the Literature

The results are consistent with the theoretical expectation that institutional trust functions as a constitutive element of effective governance, rather than a mere by-product of security conditions. This reading aligns with Börzel and Risse's (2021) theory of governance in areas of limited statehood, according to which legitimacy and social trust interact in a causally complex way with institutional design. The results are also compatible with the institutional reading of political trust proposed by Mishler and Rose (2001): if trust among Cabo Delgado's communities results primarily from assessments of institutional performance rather than from a fixed cultural predisposition, then the trust deficit documented in this study would, in principle, be reversible through sustained changes in how local institutions operate. It should be emphasized that this interpretation, although consistent with the theoretical literature used, cannot be tested directly with the documentary design adopted in this study.

The case of Cabo Delgado further adds a nuance to the literature on limited statehood: security interventions themselves appear, under some conditions documented in the sources reviewed, to erode institutional trust rather than reinforce it, when they are perceived as disconnected from local governance structures; this is a dynamic that initiatives such as the Pemba Declaration and the PAG explicitly sought to circumvent by building dialogue platforms with religious and communal legitimacy.

5.2. The Place of Traditional Authority in the Prevention Strategy

The review of the literature on traditional authority in Mozambique (Meneses, 2005; Buur & Kyed, 2007) suggests a policy implication that the literature specific to Cabo Delgado has not yet explored systematically: if the partial and ambiguous recognition of traditional structures leaves a legitimacy void in the most marginalized rural areas, and if these are precisely the areas the literature associates with greater vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups, then strengthening the status of legitimate traditional authorities could constitute a complementary pathway to conflict prevention. The caution already noted in section 4.4 bears repeating here: the sources consulted on traditional authority do not focus directly on Cabo Delgado, so this implication currently has a purely theoretical status and would require direct empirical verification in the province before it could inform concrete public policy.

5.3. Resource Wealth Without Legitimacy: The Case of Natural Gas

The finding on natural gas extraction (section 4.5) illustrates the theoretical distinction between capacity and legitimacy that structures this study. Liquefied natural gas projects represent one of the largest concentrations of material capacity ever brought to Cabo Delgado, yet the literature reviewed records no corresponding increase in host communities' institutional trust; on the contrary, it documents forced resettlement and loss of access to land without compensation perceived as adequate (Al Jazeera, 2020). This discrepancy is consistent, in a different register from that of security interventions, with the same theoretical pattern: the presence of the state or its partners, however visible or financially significant, does not appear to generate trust automatically, and needs to be mediated by perceptions of impartiality and equitable distribution of benefits (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008).

5.4. Implications for Local Governance in Cabo Delgado

These results suggest that conflict prevention strategies limited to military and counterinsurgency measures are unlikely, on their own, to achieve lasting stabilization, without a parallel strategy to rebuild local governance capacity and institutional trust. The community-level initiatives identified in this study, although modest relative to the scale of the conflict, offer potentially replicable models, particularly dialogue structures with local, religious, social, and, with due caution, traditional legitimacy. The worsening trajectory observed in 2025, against a backdrop of declining international humanitarian funding, makes this issue particularly urgent.

5.5. Theoretical Contribution and Limits of Generalisation

The central contribution of this study is to integrate three bodies of literature usually treated separately: the theory of limited statehood, the institutional literature on political trust, and the literature on authority pluralism in Mozambique, systematically applying them to a single case through documentary analysis. This integration strengthens the explanatory power of each body of literature taken on its own, but it also limits the direct generalizability of the results: Cabo Delgado combines specific factors, such as the natural gas discovery, cross-border dynamics with Tanzania, and a particular history of post-colonial marginalization, that may not be present in other areas of limited statehood. Future comparative research, ideally with primary data and a quantitative design, could test whether the pattern identified here holds in other cases of insurgency in areas of limited statehood.

5.6. Limitations

This study relies exclusively on secondary sources, constrained by limited humanitarian access to the conflict-affected areas of Cabo Delgado. It does not include primary interviews or survey data from affected communities, which would allow a more direct measurement of institutional trust at the household level. As already noted, the literature on traditional authority used refers to Mozambique in general, not specifically to Cabo Delgado. More broadly, the documentary design adopted allows plausible patterns and associations between local governance, institutional trust, and vulnerability to conflict to be identified, but it does not allow causal relationships to be established in the statistical sense of the term; the formulations throughout the article seek to reflect this distinction. Future research should seek to integrate quantitative trust indices, where available, with the qualitative analysis presented here, and to directly explore the role of traditional and religious authorities in specific districts of Cabo Delgado.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Summary of Findings

This study examined the relationship between local governance, institutional trust, and conflict prevention in Cabo Delgado, addressing the research question through documentary analysis of secondary sources. The evidence reviewed indicates that the conflict can hardly be understood, or durably resolved, through a security-centred lens alone: institutional trust deficits, linked to historical marginalization, inconsistent state presence, and partial recognition of traditional authority structures, appear consistently associated with vulnerability to displacement and violence, while the documented local governance initiatives point to a more durable, if smaller-scale, path to conflict prevention. The study’s main contribution lies in systematically bringing together three bodies of literature usually treated separately, applying them to the Mozambican case.

6.2. Policy Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following is recommended: first, adequately prioritize and fund the strengthening of local governance capacity, alongside security operations; second, support trust-building mechanisms with community legitimacy, such as inter-religious structures and traditional leadership; third, channel reconstruction investment visibly and equitably toward the affected districts; fourth, establish conflict-sensitive protocols for the conduct of security forces in host communities; and

fifth, ensure consistent and predictable international humanitarian funding for Cabo Delgado.

Generative Artificial Intelligence Use Declaration

In preparing this manuscript, generative artificial intelligence (Claude, Anthropic) was used exclusively as a tool to support language editing and document formatting. The conception, research, source selection and analysis, structuring, and drafting of the manuscript were carried out by the author, Camilo Flora Matsumbo. The author bears full responsibility for the scientific content, theoretical framework, interpretation of the evidence, discussion, and conclusions presented in the article.

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