

MEDIA, VIOLENT EXTREMISM & PEACEBUILDING SERIES

FROM CRISIS REPORTING TO PEACE CARRIERS

Media, Violent Extremism and Sustainable Peace in SADC

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UN News/UNHCR, 2025 report records that the violent extremism in Cabo Delgado Province in Northern Mozambique displaced over one million people with thousands of fatalities. Media coverage on violent extremism proved to be key in how SADC policymakers, the general populace and humanitarian entities perceive the crisis in Mozambique. This has been amplified by the information ecosystem where social media is now watershed for extremist communication and recruitment. Extremist groups use platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok and X (formerly Twitter) to micro-target young people with narratives of grievances, identity and purpose. This brief analysis posits that mainstream media coverage often defaults to securitized and event driven reporting whilst digital media is algorithm-driven platforms as it rewards sensational content. Consequently, both has the potential to unintentionally amplify extremist messaging.

This brief analysis is of the view that there is an opportunity for a strategic shift in media coverage from crisis reporting to peace carrier journalism. Most countries in SADC such as Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia and DRC have media laws which are fragmented and were enacted nationally under counter-terrorism frameworks without harmonized SADC standard for violent extremism reporting (IFEX, 2024; MISA & KAS, 2021). This creates a situation where there is no firm definition of violent extremism across SADC and gives governments and commercial entities broad latitude to determine for themselves what constitutes violent extremism (Mbeke & Kiai, 2022).

This brief analysis seeks to address both the mainstream media comprising of television, radio and online news as well as social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok. As much as SADC region is comprised of 16 member states, focus of this brief is given to Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Tanzania

who are directly affected by violent extremism and also includes South Africa, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia where key media and digital hubs are domiciled and narratives are shaped, amplified and consumed and have become primary channels for extremist communication and recruitment.

Summary of Findings

- Market dependence drives crisis reporting on violent extremism
- High state ownership and political elite control limits editorial diversity
- Current coverage of violent extremism amplifies agency narratives
- Trust in mainstream media is declining but digital demand is rising
- A gap exists for peace-oriented journalism

Summary of Recommendations

- Adopt and operationalize SADC Conflict-Sensitive Media Guidelines
- Invest in Local Media Capacity and Safety
- Rebalance Editorial Content
- Build SADC Peace Dialogue Platforms
- Legal and Institutional Protection for Journalists in Conflict Zones

01 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Violent extremism refers to activities that support the use of violence for political, religious and other identity-driven beliefs (Ferguson, 2016). The insurgency identified as Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama (Relief Web, 2019 & Atlantic Council, 2020), Alnsar al-Sunna (Fides/ZENIT, 2020) and Al Shabaab (CTC Sentinel, 2020 & Fides/ZINET, 2020) in Cabo Delgado Province, Mozambique targeted district towns, gas infrastructure and civilian populations. The drivers were identified as being mostly multi-layered but includes marginalization of the northern communities, limited state presence, youth unemployment, illicit economic activities and grievances around the gas project.

Mozambique's instability is no longer configured around FRELIMO and RENAMO as it took on another face (Mukwakwa et al, 2020). Religion, for instance, introduces a powerful and

influential dimension where media coverage often amplifies religious differences through multiple narratives centered on violent extremism. Michels (2018) posits that peace journalism is a form of media coverage committed to exploring root causes of violent extremism for communities to consider and value non-violent responses. It is a progressive and bold attempt at redefining and reconstructing the role of media in violent extremism coverage.

When media coverage is limited to attacks, deaths and military responses, the framing increases fear and stigmatization of the affected communities and crowds out stories of civilian agency, reconciliation and early warning (Innes M, Dobрева, D & Innes H, 2018, Pyszczyński T, Greenberg J & Solomon S, 1999). Reframing media coverage entails that the SADC region speak to media ownership's commercial, legal and institutional interests so that peace journalism will not remain donor dependent. There is need for state media to align with public interest mandates while private media embraces peace journalism reporting as both ethically and commercially viable. Peleg (2006) argues that peace journalism has the characteristics and capabilities of projecting constructive communication by actively framing conflict in ways that open space for dialogue, understanding and non-violent responses, and

projecting voices of women, youth, religious and community leaders.

Media owners and editors are the ultimate gatekeepers of the agenda, resources and risk (White, 1950; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; McManus, 1994) and has the capacity to aligning coverage thrust with the commercial, legal and institutional support. From a political economy perspective (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney. 1999), the framing of violent extremism in Mozambique is not accidental as it reflects the ownership structures and market pressures of media houses. It is the study of how media ownership and market structures shape news and democracy (Mosco V, 2009; McChesney, 2008). It then becomes a framework for understanding how sustainable peace journalism in SADC depends on engaging media owners, editors and not just journalists.

Mainstream media in SADC region have become increasingly market-dependent out of necessity following the decline in state subsidies and in line with global commercialization trends (Chuma, 2006). Yet most SADC countries retain a dual state-private ownership model where both sectors rely on advertising from the market, state contracts and donor funding, and this incentivizes crisis-driven coverage of violent extremism and thereby constraints the capacity of the media to function as peace carriers.

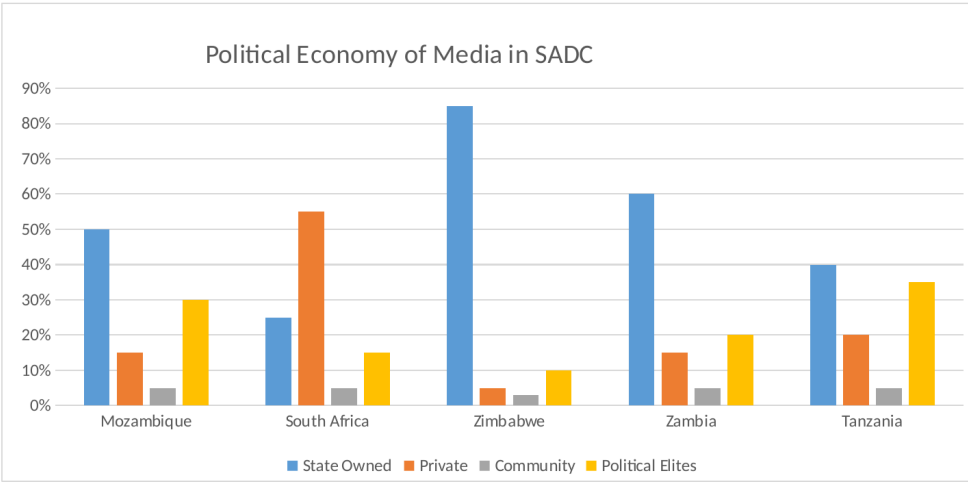


Figure 1: Data Source; Freedom House: Freedom of Press 2024: SADC Region, MISA. State of Media in Southern Africa 2023 & Reuters Institute. Digital News Report 2024: Sub-Saharan Africa

02 THE CHALLENGE OF CRISIS REPORTING

Media coverage on violent extremism does more than report crises, it actively shapes communities' perceptions of the conflict and influences how these communities understand and respond to it (Veglis & Drok et al, 2019). This is profoundly enhanced by the exclusion of who is affected beyond the victims, what is working to promote community resilience and what communities are doing to enhance social cohesion.

Media coverage that is silent on context provides the necessary gaps for extremists to fill in with misinformation and disinformation which will ultimately increase community level discrimination. Socio-political and religious identities become the only way the community define itself, and these identities become the basis for understanding the conflict. In SADC, disinformation and misinformation reinforce the understanding that violent extremism is fundamentally a clash of identities through flooding media spaces with identity-based rumors and propaganda. This framing makes the socio-political and religious affiliation the primary way communities define themselves. As much as religion has a bearing on violent extremism in Cabo Delgado but focusing on it solely as the cause of the conflict through religious radicalism is one-dimensional (Ouassif & Kitenge, 2021). An understanding of the general dynamics of the conflict is characterized by strong feelings of inequality and discrimination.

The majority of SADC newsrooms are based in Maputo, Harare, Lusaka and Johannesburg with majority of them state owned. This gives effect to remote reporting where the media houses rely on official statements, military engagements and seriously lack local sources for reporting. The media coverage is then affected by distance bias which leads to reliance on security sources rather than civilian sources. However, peace journalism is limited not by journalists' capacity to carry out their duties but by the political economy of the media. Media ownership is heavily tied to political, social and economic interests

rendering economic drivers of violent extremism less reported (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005). For the media to become peace carriers, there is need to have strategies that address owner initiatives, funding models and safety precautions for journalist and not just reporter training.

Hanlon (2025) illustrates how crisis reporting frames the Cabo Delgado conflict as mere violence while omitting its economic roots of exclusion of communities from gas and mineral benefits. This narrow framing by the media obscures the link between resource extraction and instability whereas peace journalism would have focused on community exclusion, dialogue on resource sharing and the conditions needed for sustainable peace.

03 MEDIA AS PEACE CARRIERS

Hakimi (2014) postulates that peace journalism focuses on addressing the root causes of conflicts in a way that highlights opportunities for peace. It helps explain structural drivers of conflict and not just incidents thereby placing affected civilians at the center of media coverage and not only officials and armed actors. Thus, help in focusing on responses to the conflict, reconciliation efforts and early warning indicators thereby placing more emphasis on resilience alongside violence.

The media becomes the channel through which coverage focuses on the root causes thereby reduces polarization and increases the public's capacity for informed engagement in dialogue processes. It then strives to reduce hate speech by focusing on increased coverage of civilian peace initiatives with the potential to create community cohesion and integration. As Peleg (2006) argues, media as peace carriers has the characteristics and capabilities of encouraging constructive communication whereby it places value on addressing community needs and interests. It counters extremists' recruitment by showing alternative future for the young people, and reducing inter-community suspicion between displaced and host communities by reporting on protection of civilians and not only military operations and incursions.

04 ANALYSIS OF MEDIA CHALLENGES IN THE MOZAMBIKAN CONTEXT

Media as peace carriers' entails that media coverage does not ignore violence but reportage is mainly focused on reducing escalation, increasing understanding of the context in which violence extremism unfolds and in turn amplifying non-violent responses. This translates the media into an infrastructure for dialogue, resilience and social cohesion and not only a disseminator of crisis. Media's pursuit of sensational stories inadvertently amplifies extremist publicity while its tendency to equate Islam with extremism creates a stigmatized monolith whereby it results in a broader harmful social impact (White 2020, Hallowell 2016 and Bassiouni 1982).

After the 2020 attacks, the majority of media in SADC region carried frequent ISIS linked stories relegating context specific stories. Rural residents especially in Nampula and Niassa, Mozambique disengaged from news on Cabo Delgado due to its "death news" reporting (voazimbabwe.com, 2020; hrw.com, 2020 & opiniojuris.org, 2020). SABC News, The Zimbabwe Herald and Times of Malawi relied on government quotations, SADC Mission briefings and foreign think tanks for their content in media production on events unfolding in Cabo Delgado. The Centro para Democracia e Desenvolvimento (2022) notes that the official position of the Mozambican government is of the view that the violent extremism in Cabo Delgado is an external aggression by terrorist organizations. The government sets the dominant narrative allowing the media to create a perception of security and enemy framing but not internal governance grievances.

The Mail & Guardian, eNCA and SADC cross border blogs repeatedly used the term "Islamist insurgency in Muslim North" a framing which contributed to the perception of a religious conflict rather a governance and marginalization crisis. This framing caused serious social impact as internally displaced persons from Palma and Mocimboa faced discrimination and labelling often called "Al

Shabaab" due to media focus on extremist identify (ADF, 2022; RFI 2022).

05 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Adopt and Operationalize SADC Conflict-Sensitive Media Guidelines

It is important to develop SADC Guidelines for Reporting on Violent Extremism, avoiding language and labels that blanket religious, political and other related identities but promote legally accurate terms, evidence-based attribution and reporting that situates attacks within their drivers. This has the potential to create a shared SADC standard of reporting thereby reducing sensationalism and cross-border disinformation and misinformation.

2. Invest in Local Media Capacity and Safety

Capacitate local media on peace journalism, trauma-related interviewing skills and conflict analysis for reporters at a local level to ensure stories that are prevalent in conflict infested communities fully captured.

3. Rebalance Editorial Content

Audiences in conflict zones are most exposed to agency narratives that frame violent extremism through security operations, counter-terrorism labels and the protection of state and commercial interests, and there is need for media houses and broadcasters in the region to refocus conflict reporting towards resilience, dialogue and solution-based stories.

4. Build SADC Peace Dialogue Platforms

SADC should create cross-border multi-lingual media platforms that encompass weekly SADC Peace hours syndicated programming across various community radio initiatives. The use of community radio stations could help reduce the information vacuum that extremists exploit.

5. Legal and Institutional Protection for Journalists in Conflict Zones

Fear of arrest or attack is a primary reason local media self-censor on context and impact of violence on civilians, and can only be addressed by formulating and enforcing protection measures for local journalists covering violent extremism and counter

insurgency in conflict zones to counter fear, propaganda and misinformation.

06 CONCLUSION: MEDIA AS INFRASTRUCTURE FOR PEACE

This policy brief notes that military and governance responses are necessary but are greatly insufficient to end violent extremism in SADC region. Sustainable peace requires social resilience which is inculcated through the building of trust between communities. The media in the SADC region currently functions mainly as a transmitter of crisis information, and by intentionally reframing to context

sensitive reporting, the media reduces the space for extremist narratives, propaganda, misinformation and disinformation. This will increase public understanding of the vulnerabilities of communities as well as opportunities for resilience, through the amplification of the agency of community actors who are already building peace at the local level. It is the viewpoint of this brief analysis that reframing SADC's media coverage will not be about hiding violence but about refusing to let violence be the only story to be told when highlighting stories on violent extremism.

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ABOUT SACMEP

The Southern African Centre for Mediation and Extremism Prevention (SACMEP) is a regional transdisciplinary research and knowledge hub focused on mediation and preventing violent extremism across the SADC region. The organisation envisions a peaceful, secure, and resilient Southern Africa where violent extremism is proactively prevented, and mediation efforts are effective, inclusive, and data-driven.

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