

Interview with

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IICBA: Could you please tell us a bit about yourself?

My name is Chifuniro Chikoti from Malawi. I work with the Malawi National Commission for UNESCO as an Assistant Programme Officer for Education. In my work, I provide technical assistance in education matters between UNESCO, its institutes, and all education stakeholders in Malawi.

IICBA: What are the most frequent types of conflicts or violence in your country, including risks of violent extremism?

Recently there has been an increase in cases of school vandalism where learners destroyed school properties because of misunderstandings with the authorities. For example, Robert Blake Secondary School was burnt into ashes because students protested against the management's decision to expel some of the students who broke school rules. Cases of suicide have also gone up. Students, teachers, and members of the communities have taken their own lives because of depression and stress. Most of the victims experienced some problems i.e., financial, marital, or unknown, which they failed to share with others to seek solutions. They fight the battles within themselves by themselves. When they have no solutions to the issues at hand, they may end up committing suicide.

IICBA: What are the main causes or drivers leading to conflict and violence, including violent extremism?

Background: This series of interviews was prepared for the International Day of Education on January 24 whose theme for 2024 is "learning for lasting peace". As noted on UNESCO's International Day of Education webpage, "the world is seeing a surge of violent conflicts paralleled by an alarming rise of discrimination, racism, xenophobia, and hate speech. [...] An active commitment to peace is more urgent today than ever: Education is central to this endeavor, as underlined by the UNESCO Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development. Learning for peace must be transformative, and help empower learners with the necessary knowledge, values, attitudes and skills and behaviors to become agents of peace in their communities." This series of interviews builds on projects implemented by UNESCO IICBA on education for peace and the prevention of violent extremism with support from the Government of Japan.



From
the People of Japan



One of the causes or drivers could be poverty. As people struggle to make ends meet, they may engage in some behaviors that lead to violence, like stealing for example. Some people may break into other people's houses to get valuable items to steal and sell. In some cities, though it is not always the case, you may find people being attacked in the streets. An unsustainable lifestyle is another driver. Some people have engaged in lifestyles that they are failing to maintain, spending more than what they earn. This has led many people to get loans which they end up defaulting. Depression and stress come in when there is pressure to pay back the loans. Some people have committed suicide because of that.

IICBA: What are some of the effects on individuals, communities, and society at large? Does violence affect women and girls differently?

Effects may vary. Some reports have indicated that more men have committed suicide than women. Some say men suffer in silence due to fears of being judged once they share their stories with others, and as such may resolve to kill themselves. But women and girls are mostly victims of gender-based violence. Until they start to voice out the issues affecting them in their homes, schools, or communities, many may also suffer in silence.

IICBA: Does violence and conflicts affect schooling and learning in basic or higher education?

Violence and conflicts affect schooling and learning at all levels, i.e., in basic, secondary, and higher education. We have seen primary school children engaging in violent demonstrations and vandalizing school property. Such actions lead to school closures. Schools take time to recover from the lost or damaged property. This ultimately disturbs the learning process. Secondary education is not spared from violence and conflicts. Teasing and bullying, peer pressure that leads to alcohol abuse, sexually immoral behaviors are prevalent. Many adolescent girls engage in sexual relationships. Higher education is also affected. Mental health issues have been on the rise among students at this level. Lack of financial resources to meet basic needs (food, shelter, etc.) and sometimes fees pose a threat to the students.

IICBA: What do you think could be the role of education in promoting peace and preventing violence and conflicts?

Education plays a critical role in changing human behaviours. Educated citizens embrace modern values. Capacity building is key to enlightening people. Education should be a main tool to impart knowledge and skills for promoting peace. Educators and educated people can become negotiators for peace, becoming peacemakers. Education can be used to advocate for peace and the prevention of violence and conflicts.

IICBA: If you participated in a project of UNESCO IICBA, was this project helpful, and if so, how?

I participated in several projects of UNESCO IICBA, including the Silencing the Guns Project where I was trained in transformative pedagogy for peace, resilience building, and the prevention of violent extremism. Another workshop was on enhancing youth capacities in peacebuilding and the prevention of violence, targeting student teachers from Teachers Training Colleges and universities. Then we were also trained on mental health and psychosocial services for pre- and in-service teachers. All the trainings were very helpful as I got a deeper understanding of peacebuilding and mental health. This was my first time to be trained in those areas. As a country, we proceeded to train teachers on the same. Knowing the drivers of violence and the effects of violence changed the way I understood peace: it is not only the absence of wars but having just, positive attitudes and maintaining sustainable societies. Equally in a school setting, it means creating a transformative and peaceful learning environment. Understanding mental health also assisted me in handling mental issues affecting colleagues and others.

IICBA: What does your organization or institution do today to promote peace and prevent conflicts and violence? What more could be done?

As the Malawi National Commission for UNESCO, we mobilize resources for capacity building. Recently we conducted a training on strengthening the Associated Schools Network (ASPnet) in Malawi to combat violence, discrimination, and hate speech, targeting secondary

school teachers from 18 schools. Our institution engages different partners to promote peace. The Ministry of Education is integrating peace education into the curriculum – the review of the curriculum is taking place at an opportune time. We mobilize resources for peace education interventions and support the Ministry in strengthening the Guidance, Counselling and Youth Development Centre for Africa (GCYDCA). GCYDCA is a regional category 2 Centre established with support from UNESCO. The Ministry of Education has endorsed officers to manage the operations of the Centre and revive it. The Centre is an ideal structure for capacity building in mental health issues and counselling services. By strengthening the Center, we are also developing human capacities that will be going out to combat violence in schools.

IICBA: What is your government doing today to promote peace and prevent conflicts and violence? What more could be done?

The government is doing a lot to promote peace and prevent conflicts and violence. It established a Ministry of National Unity to promote peace and developed a National Peace Policy. Recently the State President constituted the Malawi Peace and Unity Commission whose mandate is to defuse conflicts and political violence. The establishment of the Commission is one of the provisions of the Peace and Unity Act. The Ministry of Education is strengthening GCYDCA as mentioned earlier a means to promote peace.

IICBA: Have you seen innovative initiatives to promote peace and prevent conflicts and violence? How did they work?

Globally, a lot is happening in the digital world. If we can embrace digital platforms to promote peace, that will be a plus to the initiatives. For example, using WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, and other social media platforms we can reach many people in a short time. Additionally, we can promote the use of local languages in advocating for peace (e.g., developing advocacy materials in local languages). Let people hear the news about peace in their

locality and in their language! Deliberate efforts should be made to promote peace and prevent conflict and violence in an inclusive manner. Let us include all people in our initiatives: the marginalized, persons with disabilities, the poor, the rich, men and women, youths, girls, and boys. Materials that are developed for the promotion of peace should consider all people.

IICBA: What are the main challenges today to implement initiatives to promote peace and prevent conflicts and violence?

Peace education initiatives are coming as extra activities outside of the standard curriculum. With this arrangement, lack of funding for the implementation of the initiatives is a constraint. Another challenge is the lack of specialized personnel for peace education. We need staff who have gone through comprehensive training in peace education. Such personnel would be a great resource in capacitating others in peace and the prevention of conflicts and violence.

IICBA: Finally, could you share with us an anecdote about yourself or your work?

As we are promoting peace, we should also promote mental health. My work promotes education matters with all stakeholders. Peace education is becoming a major component as we are implementing SDG4, especially target 7. I would call peace education a “specialized” area in which education has to evolve around. In my work, I strive to make teaching and learning more peaceful by creating a conducive environment for all learners.

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