Proactive Conflict Management in Projects: Utilising Collaboration, Negotiation, Teamwork and Expert Guidance to Save on Time and Cost

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Kariuki Muigua

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Proactive Conflict Management in Projects: Utilising Collaboration, Negotiation, Teamwork and Expert Guidance to Save on Time and Cost

Kariuki Muigua*

Abstract

This paper discusses how proactive conflict management can be achieved in projects. The paper notes that conflicts are a common and undesirable phenomenon which can undermine the success and viability of projects. The paper discusses the causes and impact of conflict in projects. In light of their potential to damage relationships and delay completion of projects, the paper posits that proactive conflict management is a fundamental ideal in projects in order to ensure efficacy and long-term success. The paper discusses how the ideal of proactive conflict management can be achieved in projects by utilising collaboration, negotiation, teamwork and expert guidance in order to save on time and cost.

1.0 Introduction

Effective conflict management is key towards minimizing and preventing the impact of conflicts on development. It has been observed that throughout history, conflicts have been a major hindrance to development[1]. Conflicts occurring at any level, including family, local, national, regional and global levels, can have negative impacts on development[2]. Both violent and non-violent conflicts can significantly impact development outcomes. For example, violent conflicts usually cause human suffering in terms of loss of lives and livelihoods, displacement of populations, human rights abuses, destruction of social amenities and services including education and healthcare, and increased levels of poverty[3]. Non-violent conflicts on the other had can damage relationships undermining the effective functioning of societal structures[4].

Effective conflict management is therefore key towards spurring peace, stability and development. At its core, conflict management involves handling all stages of a conflict as well as the mechanisms used in addressing conflicts[5]. It has been observed that conflict management

* PhD in Law (Nrb),SC, FCIArb (Chartered Arbitrator),OGW, LL. B (Hons) Nrb, LL.M (Environmental Law) Nrb; Dip. In Law (KSL); FCPS (K); Dip. in Arbitration (UK); MKIM; Mediator; Consultant: Lead expert EIA/EA NEMA; BSI ISO/IEC 27001:2005 ISMS Lead Auditor/ Implementer; ESG Consultant; Advocate of the High Court of Kenya; Professor of Environmental Law and Conflict Management at the University of Nairobi, Faculty of Law; Member of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) [November, 2026].

[1] The Impact of Conflict on Economic Growth., Available at https://www.agrieconomist.com/the-impact-of-conflict-on-economic-growth (Accessed on 04/11/2026)

[2] Ibid

[3] Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency., 'Conflict Prevention: Opportunities and Challenges in Implementing Key Policy Commitments and Priorities' Available at https://cdn.sida.se/app/uploads/2020/12/01125316/s209461_thematicoverview_conflict_prevention_webb_final.pdf (Accessed on 04/11/2026)

[4] What is Non-Violent Conflict., Available at https://qeerroo.org/resources-afaan-oromo-amharic-and-english/what-is-non-violent-conflict/ (Accessed on 04/11/2026)

[5] Leeds. C.A., 'Managing Conflicts across Cultures: Challenges to Practitioners.' *International Journal of*

involves various strategies and techniques ranging from the most informal negotiations between the parties themselves through increasing formality and more directive interventions from external sources to a full court hearing with strict rules of procedure[6]. Conflict management therefore entails addressing and resolving disagreements that arise in various contexts. The goal of conflict management is to minimise the potential negative impact that can arise from conflicts and disagreements and encourage agreement and positive outcomes[7]. Since conflicts can undermine peace, stability and development, effective and proactive conflict management is necessary towards addressing the drivers and root-causes of conflicts in order to spur development.

This paper discusses how proactive conflict management can be achieved in projects. The paper notes that conflicts are a common and undesirable phenomenon which can undermine the success and viability of projects. The paper discusses the causes and impact of conflict in projects. In light of their potential to damage relationships and delay completion of projects, the paper posits that proactive conflict management is a fundamental ideal in projects in order to ensure efficacy and long-term success. The paper discusses how the ideal of proactive conflict management can be achieved in projects by utilising collaboration, negotiation, teamwork and expert guidance in order to save on time and cost.

2.0 Examining the Need for Proactive Conflict Management in Projects

It has been observed that conflicts are a common feature in projects due to difficulties in coordinating teams with different priorities, personalities and schedules[8]. Conflicts usually arise in projects due to differences and disagreements over tasks, when team members and stakeholders have different opinions or priorities and when miscommunication arises[9]. Since projects usually require different people to come together and work towards a common goal often under tight timeframes, conflicts can arise as a result of differences in personalities, expectations, values, perceptions and knowledge base[10]. It has been observed that given the project environment depends on the cooperation and collaboration of many people, personality clashes are usually unavoidable creating conditions for disputes and conflicts[11].

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[6] Muigua. K., 'Alternative Dispute Resolution and Access to Justice in Kenya.' Glenwood Publishers Limited, 2015

[7] Institute of Directors., 'Conflict Management' Available at https://www.iod.com/resources/business-advice/conflict-management/ (Accessed on 04/11/2026)

[8] Association for Project Management., 'What is conflict management in project management?' Available at https://www.apm.org.uk/blog/what-is-conflict-management-in-project-management/ (Accessed on 04/11/2026)

[9] Ibid

[10] Project Management Institute., 'Understanding and managing conflict in a project environment' Available at https://www.pmi.org/learning/library/understanding-managing-conflict-resolution-strategies-6484 (Accessed on 04/11/2026)

[11] Ibid

Conflicts can therefore arise in projects due to varying reasons. For example, it has been observed that resource constraints including limited budgets, time or workforce can result in tensions among stakeholders giving rise to conflicts[12]. Further, when the interests, values and priorities of stakeholders are misaligned, this situation can give rise to conflicts in projects[13]. In addition, conflicts in projects can arise in cases of role ambiguity due to unclear responsibilities[14]. Personality clashes are also a common cause of conflicts in projects especially where different members of the team have different working styles, values, and interpersonal relationships[15]. Unrealistic deadlines can also create dissatisfaction and heavy workload on the team fuelling disagreements that can lead to conflicts[16]. Furthermore, it has been observed that unfair distribution of work can build resentment, disagreement and disputes in projects[17].

In light of the foregoing, it has been correctly observed that conflicts are an inevitable part of any project, regardless of the industry or scale[18]. For example, in construction projects, conflicts and disputes are likely to occur between the contractor and employer or sub-contractor and the main contractor[19]. Conflicts and disputes in construction projects can also involve consultants, clients, manufacturers, suppliers[20]. Conflicts and disputes in construction projects are usually caused by factors such as delays in work progress, time extensions, financial failure of the contractor, technical inadequacy of the contractor, tendering and quality of works among others[21]. Conflicts are also common in environmental projects to disagreements over access to and use of vital natural resources including land, water, and forests[22]. In addition, unequal distribution of benefits accruing from environmental projects has been a major source of conflicts involving governments, investors and local communities. For instance, inequitable benefit-sharing

[12] Managing Project Conflict to Avoid Formal Complaints., Available at https://www.parallelprojecttraining.com/blog/managing-project-conflict-to-avoid-formal-complaints/ (Accessed on 04/11/2026)
[13] Ibid
[14] Ibid
[15] Ibid
[16] Ibid
[17] Ibid
[18] Mastering conflict resolution: Essential skills for project managers., Available at https://www.prince2.com/uk/blog/mastering-conflict-resolution-essential-skills-for-project-managers (Accessed on 04/11/2026)
[19] Muigua. K., 'Dealing with Conflicts in Project Management.' Available at http://kmco.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Dealing-with-Conflicts-in-Project-Management.pdf (Accessed on 04/11/2026)
[20] Dancaster. C, 'Construction adjudication in the United Kingdom: Past, present and future,' *Journal of Professional Issues in Engineering Education and Practice, 134* (2), 204-208.
[21] Cakmak. E & Cakmak. P.I., 'An analysis of Causes of Disputes in the Construction Industry Using Analytical Network Process.' *Social and Behavioral Sciences* 109 (2014) 183 – 187
[22] Muigua. K., 'Understanding Environmental Conflicts: Causes and Manifestations' Available at https://kmco.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Environmental-Conflicts-Causes-and-Manifestations.pdf (Accessed on 04/11/2026)

frameworks in carbon projects and renewable energy projects has often led to conflicts due to injustices against indigenous and local communities[23].

Common are therefore a common phenomenon in projects. With the right approaches, conflicts can enable parties to strengthen relationships, clarify priorities, interests and timelines, and collaborate towards the success of projects. It has been correctly observed that if a conflict is not negative or hostile, it can drive discussion and dialogue that can enable the success of a project[24]. However, conflicts can also undermine the success and viability of projects. For example, it has been observed that protracted conflicts that remain unsettled can negatively impact on the progress of a project and ultimately delay its delivery[25]. Conflicts and disputes can also damage relationships which is an unfavorable situation since projects need teamwork and collaboration in order to be implemented and delivered as planned[26]. In addition, without effectively addressing underlying issues, conflicts can escalate with time raising serious concerns that can affect the long-term success and stability of projects[27]. When conflicts escalate, they can jeopardize the success of an entire project[28].

In light of the foregoing proactive conflict management is necessary towards ensuring the success of projects across all sectors.

3.0 Towards Proactive Conflict Management in Projects

Conflicts are a common occurrence in projects. Since projects usually involve teams from different backgrounds, with varying personalities, working styles and attitudes, disagreement are bound to occur in the project environment potentially leading to conflicts and disputes[29]. Conflicts in projects can be constructive when they enable teams to clarify priorities, needs and interests towards the success of the project at hand[30]. However, on the other hand, conflicts in projects can be destructive when they lead to friction and resentment that undermines collaboration needed for the success of projects[31].

[23] Schmid. D.V., 'Are forest carbon projects in Africa green but mean?: A mixed-method analysis' Available at https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17565529.2022.2054400#abstract (Accessed on 04/11/2026)
[24] Association for Project Management., 'What is conflict management in project management?' Op Cit
[25] Muigua. K., 'Dealing with Conflicts in Project Management.' Op Cit
[26] Ibid
[27] Association for Project Management., 'What is conflict management in project management?' Op Cit
[28] Managing Project Conflict to Avoid Formal Complaints., Op Cit
[29] Conflict Management in a Project., Available at https://www.proofhub.com/project-management/conflict-management (Accessed on 05/11/2026)
[30] Conflict in Project Management., Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339999915_Conflict_in_Project_Management (Accessed on 05/11/2026)
[31] Ibid

Sound and proactive conflict management is therefore necessary for the success and viability of projects. In the context of projects, conflict management involves identifying, addressing and resolving disagreements and differences in order to ensure that operations run smoothly[32]. It has been observed that since projects are usually time-bound, proactive conflict management is necessary in order to ensure that conflicts are managed in an expeditious, transparent, impartial, objective and constructive manner within the projected timelines[33]. In addition, it has been pointed out that sound conflict management in projects requires that the mechanisms utilised are easily accessible by the parties from project planning, implementation and completion and where possible such mechanisms do not interfere with the progress of the project[34]. Proactive conflict management in projects requires conflicts to be addressed early through private and collaborative approaches that lead to project success[35]. Through effective and proactive conflict management in projects, it is possible to ensure project success by mitigating delays, saving costs, enhancing productivity, improving team morale, and ensuring sound decision-making[36].

The following strategies can be utilised to ensure proactive conflict management in projects.

3.1 Collaboration

Collaboration is an approach to conflict management whereby all parties involved in a conflict are brought together for a resolution through active listening and respectful communication[37]. Collaboration has been identified as powerful approach to conflict management that is built on cooperation, open communication, and finding win-win outcomes[38]. By embracing collaboration in conflict management, it is possible to preserve relationships, build trust among all parties, and foster long-term positive change[39]. Collaboration plays a key role in addressing the root causes conflicts and helping parties to develop mutually acceptable solutions that benefit all since all parties involved in a conflict are brought together and work towards resolving the underlying issues through active listening, empathy, harmony and respectful communication[40].

Collaboration is crucial towards proactive conflict management in projects. It has been pointed out that collaboration is one of the most appropriate strategies for effective conflict management in projects since this process brings all team members together to work towards win-win

[32] Conflict Management in a Project., Op Cit
[33] Muigua. K., 'Dealing with Conflicts in Project Management.' Op Cit
[34] Ibid
[35] Conflict in Project Management., Op Cit
[36] Tewari. A., 'Mastering Conflict Management in Project Management: A Key to Success' Available at https://srcpublishers.com/business-research-and-reports/article/view/839 (Accessed on 05/11/2026)
[37] Ronquillo. Y et al., 'Conflict Management' Available at https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK470432/ (Accessed on 05/11/2026)
[38] Miroslavov. M., 'Mastering The Collaborating Conflict Style In 2024' Available at https://www.officernd.com/blog/collaborating-conflict-style/ (Accessed on 05/11/2026)
[39] Ibid
[40] Ronquillo. Y et al., 'Conflict Management' Op Cit

outcomes[41]. Collaboration is best suited in addressing complex issues in projects by enabling all parties to share ideas thus enhancing innovation while also building trust and strengthening relationships among team members[42]. Collaboration is therefore suitable for proactive conflict management in projects since it focuses on common problem-solving towards tackling the root-cause of disagreements and disputes towards durable and sustainable outcomes that can ensure project success.

3.2 Negotiation

Negotiation is an informal process of conflict management that involves parties to a conflict meeting to identify and discuss the issues at hand so as to arrive at a mutually acceptable solution without the help of a third party[43]. Negotiation has also been described as a strategic form of communication where conflicting parties engage in discussions to address their respective needs, interests, and concerns[44]. According to the United Nations, negotiation is a way of coping with disagreement, with varying views and with different objectives through agreement[45]. It has been observed that negotiation is one of the most fundamental methods of managing conflicts which offers parties maximum control over the process and outcome[46].

Negotiation provides an effective approach towards proactive conflict management in projects. For example, it has been correctly observed that negotiation is usually the most efficient form of conflict resolution in terms of time management, costs and preservation of relationships[47]. The key features of negotiation including speed, cost saving, confidentiality, preservation of relationships, range of possible solutions and control over the process and outcome are vital in ensuring effective management of conflicts in projects while also supporting the overall management and implementation of the project[48]. It has been observed that negotiation enables parties to resolve disputes in a way that preserves relationships, builds trust and keeps the project on track[49].

3.3 Teamwork

Teamwork is a key approach towards proactive conflict management in projects. For instance, it has been pointed out that working as a team can minimize conflicts, enable parties to identify and address disagreements before escalation, and ensure unity in achieving project

[41] Tewari. A., 'Mastering Conflict Management in Project Management: A Key to Success' Op Cit
[42] Ibid
[43] Muigua. K., 'Alternative Dispute Resolution and Access to Justice in Kenya.' Op Cit
[44] The Role of Negotiation in Conflict Resolution Strategies., Available at https://www.karrass.com/blog/conflict-resolution-strategies (Accessed on 05/11/2026)
[45] United Nations., 'Fundamental of Negotiation' Available at https://www.un.org/en/model-united-nations/fundamentals-negotiation (Accessed on 05/11/2026)
[46] Muigua. K., 'Alternative Dispute Resolution and Access to Justice in Kenya.' Op Cit
[47] Muigua. K., 'Dealing with Conflicts in Project Management.' Op Cit
[48] Ibid
[49] Mastering conflict resolution: Essential skills for project managers., Op Cit

goals[50]. Teamwork enables diverse teams from different backgrounds and with different personalities to work together seamlessly, leveraging their collective skills and knowledge to overcome challenges and achieve common goals[51]. Teamwork can ensure proactive conflict management in projects by bringing together diverse perspectives and expertise to tackle complex problems[52]. In addition, it has been observed that by sharing information and insights, team members can collectively anticipate potential issues including conflicts and develop strategies to mitigate them before they become major problems that can affect the success of the project[53]. Consequently, there is need for teamwork that focuses on transparency and open communication through continuous dialogue and focused site meetings between all parties in order to ensure proactive conflict management while enhancing the success of the project[54].

3.4 Expert Guidance

Expert guidance is also key in ensuring proactive conflict management in projects. For instance, when disputes are technical in nature, the guidance of an expert on such issues can enable parties to achieve effective resolutions that save time and cost at the expense at the expense of referring the dispute to formal processes such as arbitration and litigation[55]. Through expert guidance, parties can utilise an independent specialist to enable them resolve technical issues without resort to litigation or arbitration which can be expensive and time-consuming thus undermining project success[56]. Expert guidance enables parties to appoint an independent expert to decide on a specific issue[57]. It has been observed that the expert does not act as a judge or arbitrator but is engaged for their technical knowledge and experience on the specific issue[58]. Since projects usually involve complex details and tight timelines, expert guidance offers a practical way to avoid prolonged processes that delay project completion[59]. Utilising expert guidance is therefore key towards proactive conflict management in projects.

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[53] Ibid
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[56] What Is expert determination and why is it important in construction?., Available at https://www.rics.org/dispute-resolution-service/drs-information-hub/what-is-expert-determination-and-why-is-it-important-in-construction (Accessed on 05/11/2026)
[57] What Is expert determination and why is it important in construction?., Op Cit
[58] Ibid
[59] Ibid

4.0 Conclusion

Conflicts can undermine the success of projects. Proactive conflict management is therefore necessary in projects in order to save on time and cost towards ensuring the success of projects. By utilising collaboration, negotiation, teamwork and expert guidance, it is possible to promote proactive conflict management in projects for long-term success and viability.

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