



## CRITICAL REVIEW OF SUSTAINABLE PEACE, MEDIATIVE DIALOGUE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Adebayo Ola Afolaranmi<sup>1\*</sup> and Akeem Adekunle Amodu<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Politics and International Relations, Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria

\*Corresponding Email: [spiritualdigest@hotmail.com](mailto:spiritualdigest@hotmail.com); Tel: +2348055159591

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8057-137X>

<sup>2</sup>Department of Politics and International Relations, Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria

Email: [amoduakeem@gmail.com](mailto:amoduakeem@gmail.com); Tel: +2348033372228

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8677-9948>

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper attempts a critical review of the interplay between social media, sustainable peace and mediative dialogue. The paper is grounded in efforts to achieve Goal 16 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: Peace Justice and Strong Institutions. It is the aim of Goal 16 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, give justice to all and make possible effective, responsible and all-encompassing institutions at all levels. The paper traced the history of the Sustainable Development Goals to the United Nations (UN) Conference on the Human Environment held in 1972 in Stockholm, Sweden. The Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations are developed from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other earlier initiatives of the United Nations. Peace is singled out among these goals, and mediative dialogue is a means to achieving this goal. The advent of the Internet, among other technologies, has significantly changed the ways people communicate globally. Social media in particular is taking a significant role in the ways people, groups and nations resolve conflicts. Through philosophical reflections and qualitative analysis, the paper recommends a framework for deploying mediative dialogue, through social media, for sustainable peace. It is, therefore, concluded that harnessing the strength of the philosophies of the phenomena of social media, sustainable peace and mediative dialogue is a veritable tool for conflict resolution and also for actualizing the aspirations for global peace as inspired by Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations.*

**KEYWORDS** – mediative dialogue, social media, sustainable development goals, sustainable peace, United Nations



## INTRODUCTION

The world is full of conflicts: conflicts within oneself, interpersonal conflicts, marital conflicts, conflicts in churches, and between churches, conflicts within a nation, and above all international conflicts. Conflicts are indeed very much part of everyday life. Conflicts have to be resolved and peace built in the person that is having the conflicts within, or people involved in the interpersonal conflicts in order to have a peaceful and non-violent society.

Peacebuilding is basically about the process of attaining peace (Hancock, 2017). However, peacebuilding differs significantly in terms of approaches, the scope of activities, and the time frame (Paffenholz, 2009). To resolve or transform conflict, one has to understand and address the feelings, issues, and relationships as well as the behaviour of people involved in the conflict (Omisore & Abiodun, 2014).

There exist copiously documented efforts of ancient mediators and conciliators toward winning over and soothing the hostility and anger of disputing parties (Williams, 2007). There may be no shortcut or simple prescription for healing the wounds and divisions of people in the aftermath of sustained violence or conflicts (Tutu, 2003). Nonetheless, conflicts have to be resolved, and people have to take deliberate active roles in resolving these conflicts and promoting peace, sustainably.

Likewise, the world has metamorphosed from being an analogue one to a digital one where technological tools play significant roles. The emergence of social media particularly has tremendously changed the face of communication throughout the world (Tella & Ampofo, 2018). Since “the principal causes of conflict...are closely related to the question of unsustainable development” (Otokola, 2016: 70), and in order to achieve one of the seventeen blueprints of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, that is, peaceful and non-violent societies (Gaffney, 2014), many people and organisations have been involved in resolving conflicts among people through various means. One of these means is mediative dialogue. Social media has changed the way people and organisations operate in the world. The world today is surrounded by information and technologies (Lillard, 2010). People and organisations now use the Internet generally and social media particularly in the process of resolving conflicts.

## ROADMAP TO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS OF THE UNITED NATIONS

The Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (also known as “Global Goals”) are the proposals to achieve a better and more sustainable (or environmental) future for everyone by the year 2030. These goals refer to “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs” (Amodu, 2019: 2).

The idea of sustainable development has been developing for almost fifty years. Precisely, the 1972 United Nations (UN) Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden (attended by 113 states and representatives from 19 international organisations) emphasised the safeguard of the human environs as a crucial element in the development



agenda. This led to the establishment of the United Nations Environment Programme Secretariat and many environmental institutions by many nations (Lohani, 2008).

The World Commission on Environment and Development issued a report entitled *Our Common Future* (also known as the Brundtland Report) in 1987. This report “suggests that creating separately existing environmental institutions is not enough because environmental issues are an integral part of all development policies” (Lohani, 2008: iv). The Earth Summit (or the 1992 UN Conference of Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro) was another landmark in the evolution of sustainable development where “Agenda 21” was endorsed. World leaders at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development took place in Johannesburg, South Africa committed themselves to implement Agenda 21. It has to be noted that “since their adoption in 2000, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have played a role in lifting more than one billion people from extreme poverty, reducing the number of people suffering chronic hunger, preventable death and illness, and enabling more girls and boys to attend school than ever before” (*From the MDGs to Sustainable Development for All: Lessons from 15 Years of Practice: 2*).

There was another conference of the United Nations on sustainable development held in Rio de Janeiro in 2012. The objective of the Rio de Janeiro conference was “to produce a set of universal goals that meet the urgent environmental, political and economic challenges facing our world”. During the meeting, member states accepted the document – “The Future We Want” – where they took the decision to start a process to develop a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to build upon the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and establish the “UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development” (“Sustainable Development Goals: Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform”). The forum served as a background to replacing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Le Blanc, 2015: 1) thereby adopting a document tagged “Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” on September 28, 2015, by 193 member states of the United Nations in its headquarters in New York (Amodu, 2020).

The document “Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” contains 17 goals “to be achieved by all countries and stakeholders by 2030” (*From the MDGs to Sustainable Development for All: Lessons from 15 Years of Practice: 1*). It is the collective objective of these goals to “build on the MDGs and complete their promising but narrow and sectoral achievements, in a more integrated, inclusive, and balanced manner” (Guerra & Lourenço, 2018: 59). By adopting these goals, “world leaders resolved to free humanity from poverty, secure a healthy planet for future generations, and build peaceful, inclusive societies as a foundation for ensuring lives of dignity for all” (Guterres, 2017: 2). These goals are described as a “kind of panacea”, “our destination is in our sights: an end to extreme poverty by 2030; a life of peace and dignity for all” (Lempert, 2017, 113). These goals “aim at tackling multiple and complex challenges faced by humankind” (Costa, et al, 2017, 1169). Dugarova & Gülasan (2017) were more explicit in giving the aim of the Sustainable Development Goals. According to Dugarova & Gülasan (2017), the Sustainable Development Goals “aim at completing the unfinished business of the MDGs and also include targets on areas that have deteriorated or become more challenging since the turn of the century, including growing income disparities within countries, insecure and low-paid employment, climate change and environmental degradation.”



## **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS OF THE UNITED NATIONS**

The Sustainable Development Goals as adopted are seventeen, though they are additionally divided into 169 targets, and there are presently about 230 pointers that have been suggested for achieving these targets (Barbier & Burgess, 2017). These goals are:

- Goal 1: No poverty (End poverty in all its forms everywhere)
- Goal 2: Zero Hunger (End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture)
- Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being (Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages)
- Goal 4: Quality education (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all)
- Goal 5: Gender Equality (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls)
- Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation (Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all)
- Goal 7: Affordable and Clean Energy (Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all)
- Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth (Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all)
- Goal 9: Industry, Innovation, Infrastructure (Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation)
- Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities (Reduce inequality within and among countries)
- Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities (Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable)
- Goal 12: Responsible Consumption, Production (Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns)
- Goal 13: Climate Action (Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts by regulating emissions and promoting developments in renewable energy)
- Goal 14: Life Below Water (Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development)
- Goal 15: Life on Land (Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat



desertification and halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss)

Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels)

Goal 17: Partnerships for the Goals (Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development) (Amodu, 2019: 2-3).

## **PEACE, MEDIATION AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

Although, promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development is placed at number sixteen in the Sustainable Development Goals and under the social pillar of the Goals (Paoli & Addeo, 2019), it is no less important because the agenda of the goals “seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom” (“Transforming Our World”: para 5). Significantly, the Sustainable Development Goals aim at reducing “all forms of violence and work with governments and communities to find lasting solutions to conflict and insecurity” (Kumar & Roy, 2018: 1153). With this aim in mind, it is the opinion of Kumar & Roy (2018) that this goal – promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development – is the most important of, and central to, all the goals in the Sustainable Development Goals because none of the other goals can be achieved without this particular goal. Crawford (2016) considered this goal as the first in achieving the other goals.

Accomplishing the goal of peaceful, just and inclusive societies is still improbable (United Nations, 2019) because we are in a world that is progressively divided and full of wars and terrorism. The world is characterized by many threats to national and international peace and stability from non-state actors. Non-state actors are now coming up as a key influence for both developing and developed countries. People are at the centre of the Sustainable Development Goals and everything that is to be achieved is centred on people. The ideas of internally displaced people and refugees resulting from wars and acts of terrorism perpetrated by people. The phenomena 'internally displaced persons', 'refugees' and 'terrorism', among others, are counter development. Maintaining peace becomes an important thing to achieve (Jaiyesimi, 2016). The focus on peace is paramount because poverty cannot be eradicated and development gained cannot be sustained in violent, conflict-prone and insecure environments (“Promoting peace through the Sustainable Development Goals”). In other words, peace should be encouraged by all means.

Nevertheless, promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development is not just about putting an end to wars, violence and terrorism. Goal 16 of the UNSDGs also implies having access to “justice..., transparency, fundamental freedoms, and participatory decision-making” (Kumar & Roy, 2018: 1154). More elaboration has been given by highlighting some key targets for peace: decreasing violence and making the public safe; voice and partaking in decision-making; putting an end to impunity and guaranteeing access to justice; transparency, accountability and controls on corruption; addressing the external pressures that lead to conflict; impartial access to social services and resources; shared



economic growth and prospects for decent means of support; the capability of states to manage revenues and execute core roles efficiently and accountably; and safeguarding equal opportunity between social groups – especially between men and women (“Promoting peace through the Sustainable Development Goals”). Interestingly, some of these targets are related to some other goals in the Sustainable Development Goals.

Since peaceful co-existence is very paramount to a healthy and developing society (Galvanek & Planta, 2017) it is germane at this juncture to raise the philosophical question: "what is peace and how can it be attained and sustained?" The concept of peace is construed differently across cultures and social values with changeable levels of importance given to individual and communal well-being (Jeong, 2000). Etymologically, the Latin word for peace “*pax*” means “freedom from civil disorder” while the Hebrew word for peace “*shalom*” designates “not only the reduction of conflict but rightness, completeness and wholeness” (Nsengimana, 2015: 36).

Peace has been defined generally as “freedom from disturbance, tranquillity, absence of war, fear, conflict, anxiety, suffering, violence, and about peaceful co-existence” (Jonah, Abdullahi, & Olawale, 2018: 78). Peace has been described as “an occurrence of harmony characterized by lack of violence, conflicting behaviours and freedom from fear or violence.... [It] means the following: A state of quiet or tranquillity; freedom from disturbance or agitation; general order or tranquillity; freedom from violence or riot; a state of reconciliation after strife or enmity” (Enaigbe & Igbino ghene, 2016: 84). A philosopher once argued that peace does not mean the absence of conflict, but the absence of *violent* conflict (Blumberg, 2006). There is another argument that peace is more than the absence of physical violence. The proponents of these lines of argument are of the opinion that "a deeper or 'positive' peace includes changes in the attitudes of conflicting parties and the transformation of the systemic and structural elements that form part of the reasons for why the tensions that are present in every society spill over and become violent" (“Promoting Peace Through the Sustainable Development Goals”: 2). Against the backdrop that “we often recognize [peace] by its absence” (Webel & Galtung, eds., 2007: 6), positive and negative peace have been identified and differentiated. Negative peace is the absence of violence, pessimistic, curative, and peace not always by peaceful means, while positive peace is structural integration, optimistic, preventive, and peace by peaceful means (Catholic Relief Services, 2018). Taheri & Dehghan (2014: 56) opined that “the word ‘PEACE’ has a clear meaning for most people, [but] ‘peaceful act’ and ‘peaceful individual’ can have different interpretations.” They went further,

the peaceful act is an act that brings humans closer to peace. And the peaceful individual is a person who is at peace. Such an individual has overcome his internal conflicts and has freed himself from other conflicts.... However, a peaceful person, who is at peace, does not have such inner brakes to stop his transcendent movement, and his mental energy is not concentrated on dealing with such conflicts.

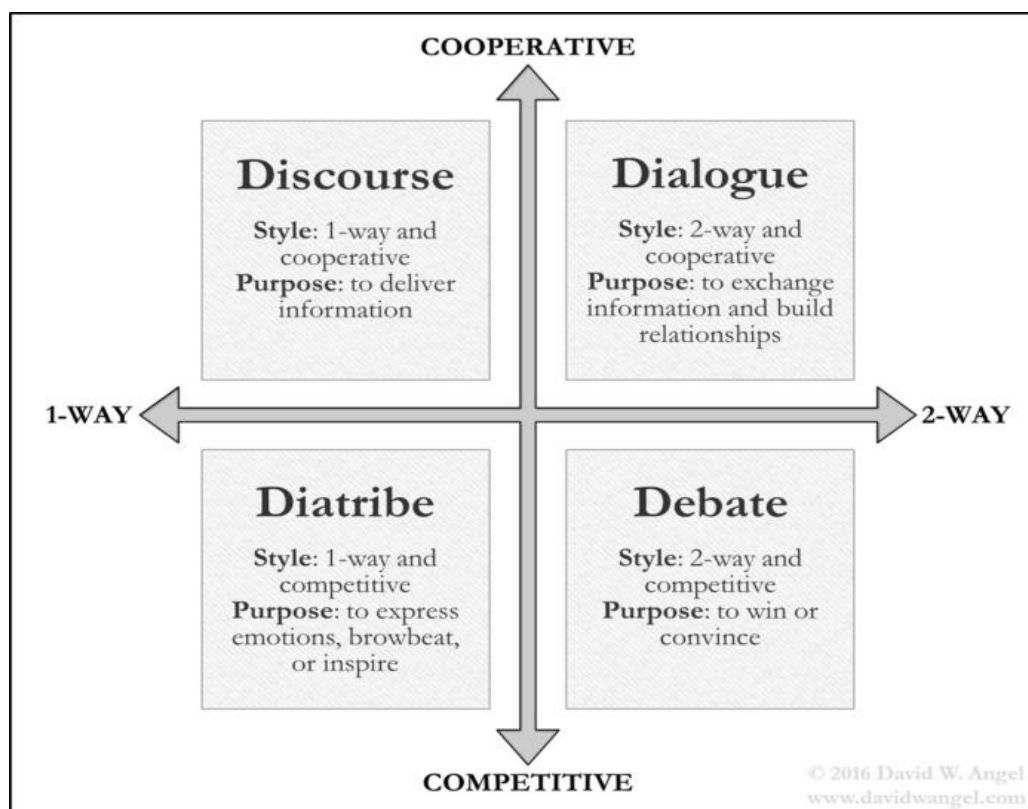
To support the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 16 that has to do with the promotion of a peaceful and inclusive society and justice and strong institutions, mediation has been identified as a veritable means and mediators “as credible intermediaries and confidence builders to improve relationships, reduce mistrust in institutions, and facilitate collaboration and coordination among polarized groups and sectors” (“UNDP Support to the Implementation of Sustainable Development GOAL 16”).

This is also corroborated in a report of the Leadership Council of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network for the UN Secretary-General (“The Sustainable Development Solutions Network”, 2013). Many countries like Israel, Latvia, Burundi, and Poland, to mention but a few have started using mediation to implement the goal. There is also the ‘cultural mediation’ approach that a researcher has developed to foster “an engagement of artists and cultural professionals in encouraging access and active participation in cultural life for all citizens” as a means to actualize Goal 10 of the Sustainable Development Goals (“Culture in the Sustainable Development Goals”).

The importance of peace to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals was particularly brought to the fore by the global outbreak of the Corona Virus popularly known as COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic and its resultant effects on the world have affected negatively the actualization of the Goals. Therefore, building “peaceful, just and inclusive societies” has become more important than before (International Alert, 2020).

## MEDIATIVE DIALOGUE

Dialogue has been described as “an interactive conversation between one or more sides working together towards a common understanding” (West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, 2012: 6). It is one of the four identified types of conversation, with debate, discourse and diatribe being the other three (Angel, 2020). Figure 1 below shows the relationship between dialogue and other types of conversation.



**Figure 1: The Four Types of Conversations (Angel, 2020)**



Haven defined and explained what *dialogue* is, Cionea (2011) identified six major types of dialogue: persuasion, inquiry, information seeking, negotiation, deliberation, and eristic. Cionea went further to briefly explain each of these types, although he admitted that each of them may overlap. In any of these types, he emphasized the need for commitment in the parties involved in the dialogue (Cionea, 2011).

Dialogue is important in resolving conflicts and peacebuilding because it is an inclusive process; dialogue entails learning, not just talking; it recognizes one another's humanity; and it stresses a long-term perspective (LeMoyne, 2019). Consequently, there are some rules of engagement in dialogue as well as in mediation. These rules include, but are not limited to, listening, respecting, suspending, voicing, transparency and seating arrangement (West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, 2012). Likewise, dialogue can make a difference in facilitating recovery from crisis; helping avert violent conflict; helping address environmental concerns; and assisting in conflict resolution (LeMoyne, 2019). Dialogues can become unsustainable "when they become 'boring', 'simplistic' or 'threatening' to a significant number of participants" and this can make them "...leave, reduce their level of involvement, or choose not to participate again" ("Sustainable Dialogue as a Necessary Template for Sustainable Global Community": para 5). Dialogue is to be done meditatively between two or more conflicting parties by conversing separately with each party through constructive discussion and negotiation of the contending issue in order to make the conflicting parties reach a mutually agreeable resolution.

## THE SOCIAL MEDIA

Terms often used interchangeably with social media include "new media, alternate media" (Aslam, 2016: 63) and online social network services (though this term is mostly used for a part of social media). Social media have been defined simply as "digital Web 2.0 platforms that facilitate information sharing, user-created content, and collaboration across people" (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015: 1653). The term "Web 2.0" means "the type of website where people can retrieve, share, write, and store information as desired" (Ngai, et al, 2015: 782). Broadly, *social media* is described as

Pervasive online (internet-activated) media platforms (also known as social network sites) that have global reach and are tremendously used by scores of millions of individuals, groups, governments, organizations and enterprises globally for various online socialization, marketing and communication activities virtually free or at relatively much lower costs (compared to accessing mainstream media) (Pate and Ibrahim, 2020: 112).

Social media are distinguished as *digital* because "they exist entirely on the Internet or portals that can access the Internet" (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015: 1653) like mobile phones and tablets, and as *platforms* that "are different mechanisms or technological vehicles for connecting people and information" (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015: 1653) as they are enabling to some extent "permanent connection between friends, family, or even strangers" (Bloemen & De Coninck, 2020: 2). Social media or online social network services focus on building online communities of people who share interests and/or activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others (Guenther, et al, 2020). Some





online services offer the opportunity of having social networks with other people of similar interests. This has encouraged new ways to communicate and share information. An interested individual can sign up and have a sort of quasi-website where he or she creates a network of friends. These quasi-websites are in form of forums, groups, blogs and the likes. They are the tools that have been created to engage people, motivate and encourage them to be better people and create better livelihoods for themselves (Adaugo, et al, 2015). Social media involve interactive participation (Manning, 2014) as social media channels allow people to connect and interact thereby allowing for more effective two-way communication and fostering conversation among the people (Schlichthorst, et al, 2019). Social media are more engaging, anonymous, worldwide, and offer constant availability and equality to their users (Segal & Keduri, 2018).

Social media has transformed and added worth to “communication through content generation, interaction, engagement, sharing and networking” (Ifejika, et al., 2019: 78). Social media “transform users from *consumers* of content to *producers* of content. It supports the democratization of knowledge and information because it empowers the users to make his/her voice heard and provides more equal access to known knowledge and information” (Lillard, 2010). Social media tools “are increasingly creating e-communities and e-societies that transcend geographical boundaries and de-territorializes nation-states” (Amodu, 2017: 7). This has made the present generation have easy access to any kind of information they want through the Internet and especially social media (Olasinde, 2014). In fact, the emergence of social media has tremendously changed the face of communication throughout the world (Tella & Ampofo, 2016) as the growth of social media has positively influenced in diverse ways how “people, communities, and organizations communicate and interact” (Orth, et al, 2020: 2). In the world today, “four out of five people who have access to the Internet use social media” (Lim, 2017). In the last ten years, owing in part to the virtually universal accessibility and use of various social media, the use of the Internet has moved from “more consumption of information to producing and sharing one’s own information” (Hollenbaugh, 2019: 1).

As there are ranges of activities on social media, Verduyn, et al. (2019) clarified these activities into two broad categories: active and passive. Active refers to activities that facilitate direct exchanges with other people in having “targeted one-on-one exchanges” and/or “non-targeted exchanges”. Passive usage refers to the monitoring of the lives of other people without engaging in direct exchanges with others. In passive usage, people usually have information without communicating with the informant or disseminating the information to other people.

## **CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY TO THE BODY OF KNOWLEDGE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS**

Many articles and books have been written on the impact (both positive and negative) of social media on society in general and various groups of people in the society (see Ononogbu & Chiroma, 2018). As highlighted by an online source social media has had an impact on the world. In the following seven key areas: politics, society, commerce, the world of work, moral challenges, personal relationships, and most especially information dissemination (What Is the Major Impact of Social Media?). While Chukwuere (2020: 4) asserted that



“building a presence on social media is becoming an essential part of humans”, the scholar was also of the opinion that “the application of social media platforms can assist in managing any lack of presence.” An online source specifically listed various social platforms that social media provide people, especially the youths, with:

- Great communication tools to connect with loved ones and old friends irrespective of location.
- Access to positive and free information being shared on Social Media.
- Opportunities to promote their businesses to a larger and wider audience.
- Social Capital.
- An avenue to contribute to the emotional well-being of others by offering positive advice.
- Opportunities to launch businesses online.
- Opportunities to market businesses online at little or no cost.
- Real-time sharing of information for businesses through paid and unpaid advertising (“Nigeria Internet Registration Association”).

Social media in general and online social networking, in particular, have been identified as two out of the three information and communications technologies that trigger the explosion of “the global web of users creating content for and conversations with each other” (or simply “social web”). Mobile Communications (or instant message applications) are the third information and communications technologies (Willard, 2009).

## CONCLUSION

Against the backdrop of the fact that the phenomenon of *social media* is transforming the ways people communicate with one another across the globe, social media has immense potential to significantly contribute to resolving conflicts through mediative dialogue. The interplay between the tripartite phenomena of *social media*, *sustainable peace* and *mediative dialogue* will if adequately and globally harnessed, create lasting peace among individuals, groups and nations across the world. Sustainable peace is achievable through the deployment of the instrumentality of social media and mediative dialogue. Thus, harnessing the strength of the philosophies of the phenomena of *social media*, *sustainable peace* and *mediative dialogue* remains a veritable tool for conflict resolution and also for actualizing the aspirations for global peace as inspired by Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations.



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