



International Journal of Research Publications

Successes of Traditional Institutions in Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation. A case Study of Traditional Institutions in Mashonaland Central Province, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study ascertains the success of traditional institutions in peacebuilding and conflict transformation in Mashonaland Central Province in Zimbabwe. The mixed method approach was study employed by combining questionnaires with community members, focus group discussions with traditional chief's council members and in-depth interviews with traditional chiefs. The findings of the study were that traditional institutions were successful in resolving social conflicts and land disputes. However, traditional institutions were not successful in resolving political and economic problems. The study recommended that traditional institutions should continue to resolve social and land disputes but in line with modern changes in legislature, technology and developmental trends.

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Key words; Conflict transformation, traditional institutions, peacebuilding, social disputes, land disputes

INTRODUCTION

There are cultural traditional beliefs within African communities that make traditional leaders respected community members as they are considered to be administrators of special body responsible for rainmaking celebrations, recognition of the dead from the wilderness ceremonies, and other practices which are valued

very much by Africans. Traditionally, chiefs and even village heads were recognised as of mature qualities, whose good judgment could not be queried. This is totally different with modern political leaders who can be elected into office even at tender ages, lacking important aspects or knowledge about socio, political and economic spheres. These elected political leaders do not normally consult community elders but their political peers who might also be immature leadership-wise (Kirby, 2006).

Traditional institutions symbolise the largest proportion of the continent's governance history, religion and culture, economic and political systems. This observation points to the futility of the native communities in bringing about sustainable socio-economic growth and development as it overlooks traditional institutions as governance partners and by noticing failure on restoring Africa's own past (Davidson, 1992). When current peacebuilding guidelines avoid history and African culture, the result is that large sums of money and special resources as well as professional and technical efforts can be exhausted without producing any favourable results. Basically, the traditional institutions alone are an inadequate clause to assist the transformation of economic systems, political systems and social systems. Traditional institutions may hamper or help improving democratic transformation because the institutions are going through continuous alterations. It is most likely that political and economic improvements become fruitful upon broadly participating and involving of the whole community on institutional governance systems and cultural principles (Fallers, 1955).

Addressing conflicts in Africa, using traditional institutions demand the use of community beliefs, morals and attitudes, social order and procedures, authorities and structures as well as cultural practices. These belief systems, morals and cultural practices are based on the appreciation of reconciliation found on cultural practices enshrined in African Traditional Region (ATR). The ceremonies held with regard to spiritual dimension in Africa play an essential role in conflict resolution processes, reconciliation and conflict transformation. Rituals and ceremonies which deal with the spiritual dimensions include beer brewing and drinking, sacrifices and special prayers and appeasing of ancestral spirits for appropriate reconciliation to be achieved. This is totally different when using Western methods of resolving conflicts which make use of strange conflict resolution methods to African soil, which makes it hard to achieve true reconciliation. To this end, it shows African methods of conflict resolution combine a number of mechanisms which are based on mediation, negotiation, facilitation and reconciliation (Kirby, 2006).

This observation on the other hand distinguishes the reality that traditional institutions stand as a very important local authority with the potential to encourage and influence democratic systems of governance and to assist in promoting involvement and participation of rural communities to administration of public services. Along with the point of view highly developed by this observation, traditional institutions can lay a solid foundation on which to erect new varied governance structures because traditional chiefs serve as custodians of their communities and promote the interests their communities within the wider political systems and structures. In addition, in African the context, conflict resolution narrows the differences between conflicting parties. This is one of the strengths of traditional institutions on the governance of local communities (Skalnik, 2004).

Traditional institutions are a vital cog in the peaceful existence of communities. The success of traditional institutions is hinged on effective communication in conflict and post conflict settings. Its impact is seen in preserving and addressing the socio-economic, political and environmental issues. Traditional institutions form the key pillars of governance, preservation of traditions, customs and values (Crook, 2005). They are the core moral social fabric of any society. In modern day societies traditional institutions are being overtaken, eroded or replaced with western models of governance. However, the western models of governance fall short in terms of cultural significance in most African societies. While the traditional

institutions are being incorporated in modern day governance structures significant success is still witnessed in certain domains. Traditional institutions remain relevant in resolving social disputes, land disputes and to some extent the preservation and management of natural resources and heritage sites. Several studies have looked at traditional institutions from various perspectives (Mbwirire, 2018; Crook, 2005). This study seeks to explore the successes of the traditional institutions in the modern-day Zimbabwe context where the western model and technology have virtually taken over. The study covers the period 2000 – 2018.

Research Objective

- To identify the areas of success by traditional institutions in peacebuilding and conflict transformation mechanisms used at grassroots levels.

Research Question

- What are areas of success of traditional institutions in peacebuilding and conflict transformation at grassroots levels?

Methodology

The study used the descriptive survey design which incorporates the Case Study approach. This study was descriptive in nature. By handing out questionnaires and conducting focus group discussions (FGD) and in-depth interviews (KII), the research study followed the lane of descriptive research.

Study Area

Mashonaland Central province in Zimbabwe was the case study area for this study. Area of study covered is 28 347km² and a population of 1 152 520 which is about 8.5% representation of the total population of Zimbabwe. Seven districts of the province covered are Guruve with a population of 200 833 people, Shamva with a population of 98 077, Mount Darwin with a population of 307 946 people, Muzarabani with a population of 121 127 people, Mazowe with a population of 198 966 people, Rushinga with a population of 67 829 people and Bindura with a population of 156 842 people, Census Report (2012).

Population

The target population for this study was for people who were above the age of eighteen years. They were 518 634. This comprises of community members and local leadership structures as well civic organizations.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The study used a mixed methods approach combining questionnaires, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Survey data was collected from a sample of 250 respondents which was drawn using a stratified random sampling approach from all the 7 districts in the province. In-depth interviews were done with 7 participants representing the 19 traditional chiefs in the province. Seven focus group discussions were conducted with 65 out of 87 members who comprise the Chiefs' Councils (*Dare Ramambo*). Purposive sampling was used to identify participants for both the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Conflicts which Traditional Institutions Resolved Successfully

The study wanted to have an insight on issues which traditional institutions did resolve successfully. Below is the presentation of results obtained:

According to Table 1 below, land disputes and social issues were dealt with successfully with traditional institutions. However, political and economic issues had failures.

Table 1 Issues which Traditional Institutions Resolve Successfully

Category of Issues resolved	Sex of Respondents		Total (n=249)
	Male (n=175)	Female (n=74)	
Political	5.7%	4.6%	9.7%
Social	82.2%	81.0%	81.9%
Economic	0.0%	2.7%	0.8%
Land disputes	71.4%	70.2%	71.0%
<i>Source; Primary data</i>			

The success had no differences between male and female community members. On the other hand, failures had no differences between male and female community members on political and economic disputes. This finding complements data discussed on Table 1.

All FGD informants indicated that they do resolve social disputes and land disputes. Economic and political disputes were referred to the police. All KII informants concur with data gathered through focus group discussions that they resolved social and land disputes successfully. When probed further on why they do not resolve economic and political disputes, informants indicated that the disputes are criminal in nature; therefore, legally they deal with issues which involve preservation of culture and heritage. Informants went on to say that issues to do with rape and murder were first attended by the police and health practitioners. At the level of reparations, reinstitutions and compensation, traditional institutions then participated in healing and reconciliation.

Data presented above indicated that community members were aware that social disputes and land disputes were successfully dealt with by traditional institutions. The greater percentage of disagreement on land disputes can be attributed to the fact that land disputes are an area covered by both traditional institutions and governments departments like Ministry of Rural Development, Lands and Agriculture as well as Ministry of Local Government and Rural settlement.

According to Mutisi (2011) traditional institutions in peacebuilding and conflict transformation cannot be simple. In African countries, traditional institutions, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, and Burundi, continue to play remarkable roles in promoting co-existence. Traditional institutions have been in charge of resolving land disputes, social conflicts and in rare occasions, criminal cases. In Rwanda, traditional institutions approaches in conflict resolution are entirely documented; in other countries such traditional approaches exist extra-judicially.

Boege (2006) identified other governance systems and structures as simply outposts of the state. In reality, traditional institutions which survived prior to colonialism were the legitimate institutions. During and after colonialism, traditional institutions continue to actively participate and getting involved in community justice

systems and local governance structures. Prosperous peacebuilding being a multifaceted process, it is actually an interdisciplinary field which covers several important areas such as; security issues, economic issues, social issues and political matters (Jeong, 2005).

Traditional institutions may not have the capacity to deal with all kinds of conflicts in a community because their applicability is confined to specific conditions (social and land disputes). During the pre-colonial period, they were typically intended to resolve small-scale familial, clan or community disputes, such as boundary disputes, land conflicts and insignificant theft. On the other hand, present-day conflicts in African communities are often found between or among unequal groups alienated by ethnicity, religious beliefs, ownership and use state resources, geographical locations and political ideology. Participation of traditional institutions participation and involvement in such circumstances is limited sharply. Moreover, it would be improper to let traditional institutions facilitate mediation process in dealing with sensitive criminal behaviours, such as sexual abuse, rape, abductions, violence, murder and other atrocious crimes.

FINDS

This study finds that traditional institutions were successful in resolving social conflicts and land disputes. On the other hand, traditional institutions were not successful in resolving political and economic problems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The traditional way of life (examples, inter-marriages, festivals, music and dance, joking relationships) that encourages unity, harmony and peace needs to be promoted in all spheres of life.

Traditional institutions are recommended to take an active role in restoring democracy and justice in Zimbabwe. This is possible because of the power and influence they exercise in their communities.

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