Strengths and Weaknesses of Traditional institutions in Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation in Mashonaland Central Province, Zimbabwe

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Abstract: This study explored and identifies the strengths and weaknesses of traditional institutions in peacebuilding and conflict transformation in Mashonaland Central Province in Zimbabwe. The study employed a mixed method approach combining questionnaires with community members, focus group discussions with traditional chief`s council members and in-depth interviews with traditional chiefs. The findings indicate that traditional institutions have more strengths than weaknesses in peacebuilding and conflict transformation programmes. The study recommended that there is need to come up with a policy framework which encompasses both African traditional models and western models in modern day life.

Keywords: Peacebuilding, African view, western view, traditional institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional institutions use approaches which are suitable and relevant to remedy situations where a community is fragile or face collapse due to conflict. A revitalization of traditional mechanisms and approaches to peacebuilding and conflict transformation can be considered mostly under conditions of state brittleness and state collapse. Contemporary conflicts in Africa are happening when the state is absent, or where the state is involved actively, and or where the state has no capacity to end the violent conflict. Situations like this would require involvement and participation of traditional institutions to end the hostilities and build bridges for long-lasting peace. Boege [1] indicated that traditional institutions have the capacity to end hostile conflicts from grassroots levels to national levels, for example, this happened in Somalia.

Western view gives the state the main role to maintain peace and provide security to its citizens. Furthermore, the state has the right to determine when to use force to protect its citizens. In so doing, the western view undermines the capacity and role of traditional institutions in pecaebuilding and conflict transformation [2]. However, non-state institutions (such as traditional leadership) have the capacity to prove western view as false [3].

Traditional institutions use mechanisms and approaches which are not state-centric. This gives them credit and legitimacy over communities which they preside over. Communities respect more rules which they make rather than rules made by the state. Therefore, efforts to impose western models of peacebuilding and conflict transformation on African societies cannot match and meet the superiority of existing indigenous approaches and mechanisms of peacebuilding and conflict transformation. Basically, traditional mechanisms and approaches have proven to be effective and legitimate to African societies [1]. Even Mbwirire and Dube [4] observed that African traditional mechanism and approaches were suitable and relevant in peacebuilding and conflict transformation programmes.

Considering time is one factor which African mechanisms and approaches take into account. The approaches and mechanisms are process-orientated. Failure to consider time factor has negative consequences to both African context and European context [5]. Processes and steps in peacebuilding and conflict transformation tend to be time-consuming. Also, the processes are more important than solutions.

There is an element of community inclusion and participation found in traditional mechanisms and

approaches. That way, all concerned parties involved in the conflict, are responsible for its solution. In most cases, solution to the conflict is reached by consensus. Both warring factions have to recognise the reached resolution as a win-win outcome. Even across gender, men and women find their needs met satisfactorily. At times, it might be misleading to simply consider African societal structures with patriarchalism and oppression of women. Western societies consider gender equality more than African societies. Societal norms and believes determine the appropriateness of the context in which peacebuilding and conflict transformation approaches [6].

An important ingredient of African traditional approaches is the focus on the psycho-social healing and the spiritual dimension after violent conflicts. This aspect is underestimated by western actors who believe in the context of western Enlightenment [6]. Conflict transformation and peacebuilding therefore, is not only centred on negotiations, political agreements reached and reconstruction of infrastructure. It is also concerned about cleansing, reunion and psycho-social and spiritual healing.

Traditional mechanisms and approaches of peacebuilding and conflict transformation necessarily do not put an end to conflict and violence on long term basis. This means achieving long-term peace in African context is not certain. At times, traditional mechanisms and approaches may disagree and challenge general standards of human rights and liberal democracy. For example, broker peace deals between warring parties and if traditional institutions essentially consist of old men, this can be considered as gerontocratic rule. This technique is considered as problematic from a liberal democratic perspective. Young men and women are excluded from decision-making processes become the subjects of these decisions. African traditional mechanisms also consider women as a payment fine for certain offences [7]. Such practices can create more conflicts.

Boege [1] believe that traditional African approaches have a narrow sphere of applicability in peacebuilding and conflict transformation. The mechanisms and approaches are limited to the perspective of relatively small community. MacGinty [8] indicated that traditional mechanisms and approaches are preservative. The mechanisms put focus on the preservation of the status quo and or the restoration of the 'peaceful past. This means that disturbances caused by conflict should be prevented, controlled and fixed. The traditional approaches are applicable and suitable for a given community and cannot universally be applied to all situations.

In modern day socio-political environment, traditional institutions use approaches and mechanisms which are subject to abuse. Political co-option, corruption, nepotism, and abuse of power are some of the abuses which traditional institutions can fall into [4].

No institution of leadership or community development has no its own share of weaknesses and strength. What were the strengths and weaknesses of faced by traditional institutions in Mashonaland Central Province towards peacebuilding and conflict transformation? The purpose of this study was to identify the strengths and weaknesses of traditional institutions in peacebuilding and conflict transformation.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Mashonaland Central Province. The province has a total area of 28 347km^2 and a population of 1 152 520 representing about 8.5% of total population of Zimbabwe, The province have seven districts which are Guruve with a population of 200 833 people, Shamva with a population of 98 people 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).

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.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Strengths of traditional institutions in Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation

There were no differences between male and female on the strengths of traditional institutions in peacebuilding and conflict transformation (Table 1 below). Such community recognition at grassroots levels is an indication that traditional institutions could be used for behavioural change as far as conflict transformation is concerned.

Table-1: Strength of Traditional Institutions

Strength	Sex of Respondents		Total (n=249)
	Male (n=175)	Female (n=74)	
Community based	58.3%	85.1%	66.3%
Culturally appropriate	94.3%	78.4%	73.5%
Spiritual healing and cleansing	97.1%	97.3%	97.2%
Impartial and fair	86.9%	71.6%	82.3%
Use local language	98.3%	98.6%	98.8%
Not expensive	98.3%	98.6%	98.8%
Win-win situation	97.1%	98.6%	98.0%
Source; Primary data			

FGDs and KIIs data indicated that unlike the judicial system, traditional institutions were part of the community, dealing with issues based on social contract. In addition, informants indicated that the strength of traditional institutions rests on using local language with a shared community culture and resolving disputes based on satisfying both the victim and the perpetrator. If the victim was mentally and physically traumatised, traditional institutions provided healing to the affected victim as well as emotional support. One of the informants said *"Simba redu riri muvanhu vatigere navo, saka tinonzwanana pamutauro zvakanaka. Chinokosha tinowanika pasina muripo kumunhu wese, togadzirisa zvinotso nenzira yakajeka"* (FGD informant). (Being community based and use of same language is the source of our strength. Essentially traditional institutions are free for all and all proceedings are impartial). Another informant said *"Traditional institutions are like a community well where everyone can quench his/her thirst. It shows that we are part of the community, use familiar language, impartial and fair. Above all we emphasize a win-win situation. This is the source of strengths have as servants of the people we lead"* (KII informant).

Survey, FGDs and KIIs data revealed that the strengths of traditional institutions were based basically on being community based. Because of that, communities had a shared cultural perspective; use common local language, are reachable and free for all. The major element to consider in peacebuilding and conflict which gives traditional institutions distinct advantage was provision of spiritual healing and cleansing. This gives an advantage to heal both physically, mentally and spiritually.

The findings of this study concur with identical studies done by Makoni [9] and Benyera [10]. These scholars postulated that Western methods of conflict resolution and co-existence do not consider African cultural dimensions which are community based. Any conflict prevention, management and resolution which is community based is more credible than individualistic approach.

Weaknesses of Traditional Institutions in Conflict Transformation

As indicated on Table 2 below, specific weaknesses of traditional institutions as far as peacebuilding and conflict transformation was concerned. These weaknesses affect the day-to-day operations of traditional institutions.

Table-2: Weaknesses of Traditional Institutions

Weakness	Sex of Respondents		Total (n=249)
	Male (n=175)	Female (n=74)	
Unfit to modern society (outdated)	58.3%	85.1%	66.3%
Adapt too slow to new democratic systems	94.3%	78.4%	73.5%
Politically co-opted and manipulative	97.1%	97.3%	97.2%
Not systematic and consistent on political and socio-economic disputes determination	86.9%	71.6%	82.3%
Lacks legal representation	98.3%	98.6%	98.8%
Lacks documentation	97.1%	98.6%	98.0%
Male domination on leadership positions	98.3%	98.6%	98.8%
Time consuming	85.1%	90.5%	86.7%
Corrupt and biased towards minority and disadvantaged groups	97.1%	98.6%	97.6%
Source; Primary data			

Unfit to modern society was one of the challenges affecting traditional institutions. More female than male echoed these sentiments. The possible reason could be that, women are sidelined, or fewer women were involved in leadership position, therefore, they could be unaware of developments which took place in the way traditional institutions were operating. Contrary to this, more male than female indicated that traditional institutions adapt too slowly to new democratic systems. This could be a result of the bureaucratic nature of transformation prevalent in public institutions. More to this, it is difficult to change traditional practices because of their nature, which is 'traditional'. There were no noteworthy differences between male and female on the following challenges: politically co-opted and manipulative, not systematic and consistent on political and socio-economic disputes determination, lacks legal representation, lacks documentation, male domination on leadership positions, time consuming and being corrupt and biased towards minority and disadvantaged groups. These were the challenges community members perceived.

The majority of FGD informants indicated that the major problem which traditional institutions faced was less or no recognition by legal experts and the judicial system. These caused situations which looked as if determination of cases presented to traditional courts were not legally binding. A few of the informants indicated that these problems persisted for a long time since the early 2000s to date. One informant said *"Vana magasitiriti havakosheshi mitongo yatinopa pavonoona ma appeal paya. Kutizvidza kusingaiite. Ndodambudziko hombe ratinaro"* (FGD informant). (Magistrate courts do not overlook our judgements when appeals about our rulings reach their courts. This is a major drawback we face).

Data gathered through KIIs data agrees with data gathered through focus group discussions where the popular view indicated that traditional institutions faced no recognition by legal experts and judicial system when dealing with the majority of cases appealed to them. More so, traditional institutions indicated that they find it hard to deal with sensitive issues such as rape and political issues, which are issues rampant in the community. When probed further on why traditional institutions were labelling political issues 'challenging' while they were political activists themselves, the majority of informants indicated that their activism was misunderstood by migrating people from urban areas to rural areas while the majority were skeptical to comment on political issues. Some indicated that political challenges were outside the jurisdiction of traditional institutions. One informant said *"………. rape and political disputes are dealt with by the judicial system and the police, personally I am not comfortable discussing political issues"* (KII informant).

Survey and FGDs and KIIs data concurs that traditional institutions had challenges which include: being corrupt and biased towards the less privileged, politically co-pted and manipulated. This shows that the services of traditional institutions are more demanding when situations are tense but if wrongly employed, can cause more harm than good.

In a related study in Ghana, Mohammed [11] observed that it was a challenging moment for traditional institutions today in protecting our cultural heritage. The contemporary youth of Africa no longer respect the views of the elders, the taboos are flouted, and immorality is rampant. Their minds are contaminated with foreign lifestyles and they do not value own traditional way of life, describing our beliefs as primitive and outmoded. The cause of this is the Western education and religion that manipulate the daily life of our youth and urban folks. Many people now prefer to resolve their disputes in court rather than at the communal courts where traditional institutions preside. To a larger extent, this problem affects also family heads that are not able to control their children due to education. The latter watch films and all forms of morally wrong photographical images on Television sets, internet and electronic small gadgets and other machines, and when elders talk, they are considered old-fashioned, uneducated and enemies of developmental advancement.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study finds that traditional institutions still command respect, appreciation, recognition and dignity from their subjects. In communal areas people are still influenced by African traditional religion; the traditional institutions are considered to be the bridge between the spiritual world and the community. Furthermore, traditional institutions are community based, culturally appropriate and not expensive. The community considers them as part of the solution when faced with difficulty challenges they cannot handle. These challenges include famine, natural disasters, leadership, political challenges and economic hardships just as in the pre-colonial period. For these reasons, traditional institutions are very influential in their communities.

Major weaknesses affecting involvement and participation of traditional institutions in peacebuilding and conflict transformation in Zimbabwe identified were that; they adapt too slowly to new democratic systems, are politically co-opted and manipulated and lacked legal representation. In addition to this, traditional institutions take a long time to finish processes of healing and reconciliation, are corrupt and

also inferior to the judicial system and male dominated on leadership positions.

The study recommended that there is need to come up with a policy framework which encompasses both African traditional models and western models in modern day life.

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