



# TRADITIONAL LEADERS' REFLECTION PAPER

Reflections on CBOs, CSOs and Community Leadership Training  
on Peace Building and Conflict Transformation for Enhanced  
Governance and Social Accountability



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## 1. Introduction

Civic Forum on Human Development (CFHD) in partnership with Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) conducted traditional leaders' workshops targeting chiefs, headmen, and village heads in Mashonaland East Province: Murewa, Goromonzi, Chikomba, and Mudzi Districts, Mashonaland West: Makonde and Chegutu Districts and Mashonaland Central: Mbire District. In Zimbabwe, the institution of traditional leadership comprises chiefs, headmen, and village heads in order of hierarchy. The traditional leaders' workshops were conducted in the districts where the CFHD and KAS have collaborated in the capacity-building of elected councilors. During the training of elected councilors, it was noted that there are conflicts amongst elected office bearers and the traditional leaders in local governance structures hence the need to cascade the training to local levels so that there is cohesion. The training workshops focused mainly on four key components that are:

- a. Constitutionalism and the Role of Traditional Leaders.
- b. Social Cohesion and Culture Rejuvenation
- c. Green Economy and Community-led resilience building roles and responsibilities of traditional leaders within their communities on local government systems.
- d. Devolution and the Vision 2030

CFHD worked with the office of the District Development Coordinator (DDC) who were mobilizing the targeted participants at the local level. The training workshops also targeted the Village Development Committee (VIDCO) secretaries to be part of the training.

## 2. Context Analysis

Zimbabwe adopted a new Constitution amendment (No.20) in 2013 which, among other things recognises the role of the institution of traditional leadership which operates alongside modern state development structures. Village heads are physically the closest to the people and thus, have the most interactions with the citizens in rural areas. Before the colonization of Zimbabwe, the institution of traditional leadership was the sole governance structure with legitimacy to govern derived from tradition and culture. While strengthening the role and status of the institution this new Constitution strictly regulates the conduct of traditional leaders. Despite this upliftment and strict regulation, the role and relevance of the institution of traditional leadership are under significant scrutiny. Traditional leaders are often in conflict with actors and institutions that are active within existing development structures,

particularly rural local authorities and elected community leaders in government, which is largely attributed to competition for power, limited knowledge of roles and responsibilities, resources, and legitimacy. It is the conduct of traditional leaders, however, that is cause for concern and raises fundamental questions on their constitutional role in the context of local governance, social accountability and delivery of gender-sensitive services.

Traditional leaders play a complex and multifaceted role in Zimbabwean society, serving as custodians of culture, arbiters of local disputes, and conduits between communities and the state. There have been debates over the relevance of the institution of traditional leaders given the associated cost of keeping the institution functional; yet traditional leaders still undertake important responsibilities, especially in rural areas where 67 percent of the population resides.

Traditional leaders are basically members of the community exercising a form of leadership that rests on traditional or customary authority, such as lineage or descent. Traditional leaders deliver various government responsibilities in some parts of Zimbabwe where the central government has no or a limited presence. Their legitimacy, control, and influence in rural areas remain widespread demonstrating remarkable resilience, despite facing various threats. Successive governments in both colonial and independent Zimbabwe have sought to maximize this strength for their respective narrow political interests through state capture and manipulation of the traditional leader's institution. All these controversies, conflicts, and complexities raise questions about the role and relevance of the institution of traditional leadership in Zimbabwe which this reflective article seeks to untangle based on the interaction with the traditional leaders themselves.

The districts are administered by local authorities alongside the institution of traditional leadership comprising chiefs, headmen, and village heads. The jurisdiction of traditional leaders does not correspond to the formal boundaries of these districts. Usually, a district has more than one chieftainship with each led by a chief. The boundaries of jurisdictions of chiefs are a contested area as the traditional leaders seek to expand their geographical area of influence.

There are around 272 chiefs nationwide. Each district is divided into wards, with each ward represented on the council by an elected councilor. The ward consists of six or more villages. Section 18(1) of the Traditional Leaders Act requires the establishment of a ward assembly for every ward under the jurisdiction of a rural local authority. The assembly is composed of the councilor, all headmen, and village heads in the respective ward. It is chaired by a headman elected from amongst the members of the ward assembly. Thus while the elected councilor represents the ward on the council, it is actually a traditional leader (headman) who provides leadership to the ward

assembly. The ward councilor chairs the ward development committee which is charged with providing technical assistance to the ward assembly including the formulation of a ward development plan for submission to the relevant local authority. There are about 452 headmen in the entire country with each of them having the status of a sub-chief.

### 3. The Traditional Leaders Training Package

The training focused on four key components which are expanded below.

#### 3.1 Constitutionalism and the Role of Traditional Leaders

The existence and establishment of the institution of traditional leadership is provided and the regulatory framework is guided by the following instruments.

- ▶ Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment No.20- 2013- Section 280
- ▶ Communal Land Act [Chapter 20:04]
- ▶ Traditional Leaders Act [Chapter 29:17]
- ▶ Regional, Town and Country Planning Act [Chapter 29:12]
- ▶ Customary Law and Local Courts Act

Traditional leaders were capacitated to understand that Zimbabwe is a unitary, democratic, and sovereign republic of which local authorities are a tier. The unitary state mechanism comprises of the following tiers; -



Figure 1: Government tiers in Zimbabwe

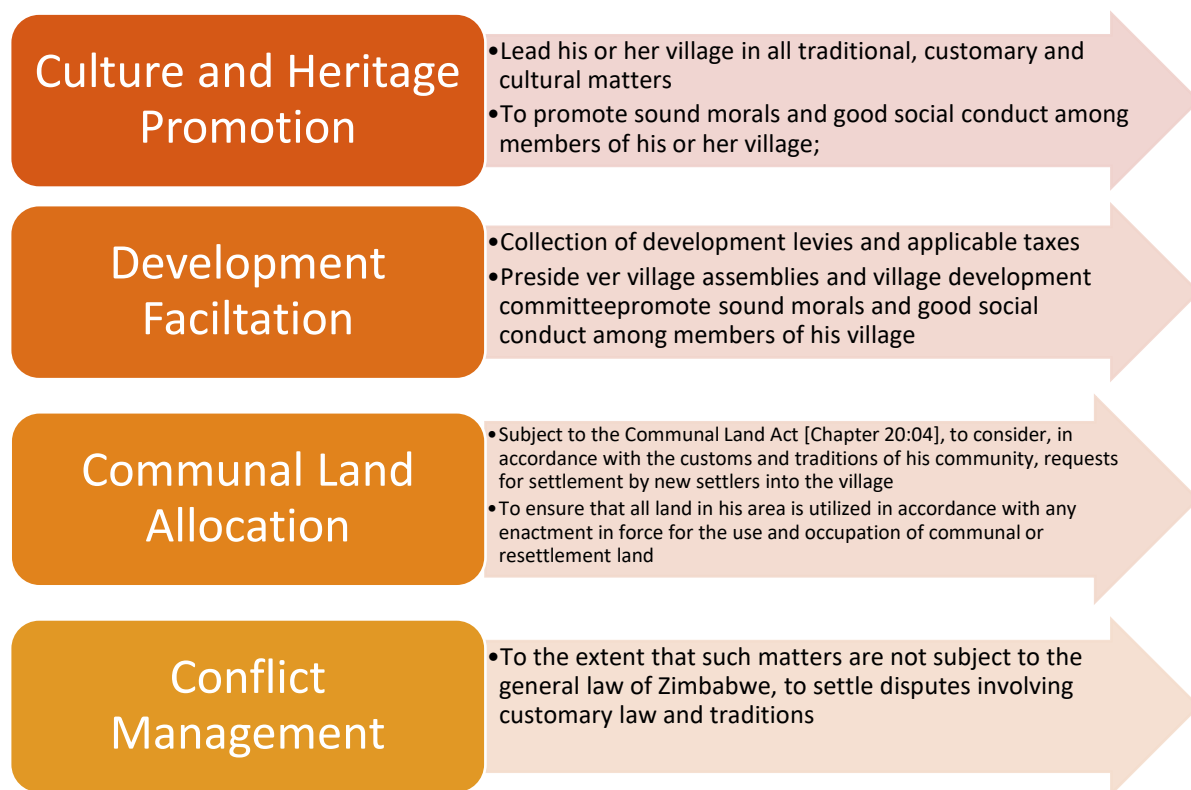
Urban Councils represent and manage the affairs of people in urban areas as provided for in the Urban Councils Act (Acts 21/1997,3/2000, 22/2001,13/2002). On the other hand, traditional leaders are guided by the Traditional Leader’s Act (Act 25/1998, Modified by S.I. 430A/1999, 22/2001), the Communal Lands Act, and the RDC Act. The Traditional Leaders Act states the roles and responsibilities of traditional leaders in facilitating transformational development.

The rural local governance is characterized by three main distinct authority structures- the District Development Coordinator (DDC), local authority, and institution of traditional leaders. Each of these actors draws on divergent sources of legitimacy and exercises power and responsibilities, which overlap significantly and demand to be managed with wisdom and agility to avoid acrimony. When competency and jurisdiction boundaries are not clear or are in dispute, conflicts among the three actors are bound to occur as they assert their legal and customary spaces. While the DDC and local authorities play a crucial role in rural local government the discussion during the training workshops was primarily focused on the role of the traditional institution with their specific roles.



*Figure 2: A snap of the traditional leader’s levels and roles*

The roles and responsibilities of the Village Head are summarized below:



*Figure 3: Summarised roles and responsibilities of village heads*

### *3.2 Social Cohesion, Cultural Rejuvenation, and Conflict Transformation*

The Traditional Leader's Act is based built on the Constitution, tradition, and customs, and the traditional leaders were equipped to ensure that there is cultural rejuvenation so that the country remains with an identity. The traditional leaders were also further trained on the need to build social cohesion. Social cohesion is important in development because it encourages unity between institutions and the community at large which is termed HOCHEKOCHE in Shona.

### *3.3 Green Economy and Vision 2030*

Traditional leaders were trained on components of a Green Economy that as (i) Low Carbon growth- how the traditional leaders can lead their communities in ensuring that there is reduced air pollution which can be achieved by cutting fewer trees and reducing the rate of veld fires (ii) efficient use of the locally available resources such as land, forests, water and also adoption of renewable energy technologies such as solar, biogas and wind energy (iii) Social inclusivity- ensuring that society is represented in terms of decision making and prioritization of development options. Traditional leaders were also capacitated on how they can facilitate the development of community-led resilience through strengthening indigenous

knowledge systems in the wake of environmental and economic shocks such as climate change.

### *3.4 Devolution and Resource Mobilization*

Since the beginning of the second dispensation, the Government of Zimbabwe has been on a drive to operationalize the devolution mantra through fiscal support of rural local authorities. The funding from devolution has not been quite adequate, however, there are significant projects that have been implemented by local authorities, especially infrastructure projects. To complement the government efforts, traditional leaders are a pivotal instrument at the grassroots level to ensure there is fruition to the mantra. As such, the training also focused on equipping these traditional leaders on devolution and resource mobilization to the traditional leaders.

## **4. Emerging Issues from the Capacity Building Programme**

### *4.1 Boundary conflicts tend to undermine role of TL*

The village heads across all the districts expressed the challenges that the communities are facing due to boundary conflicts. There are no updated village maps and as such there are encroachments on the traditionally marked boundaries. In some instances, boundaries were marked by rivers and wetlands and these have been illegally occupied which makes it difficult to have clear boundaries.

### *4.2 Illegal Land Allocation by Traditional Leaders emerged as a serious challenge*

There has been an increase in the number of cases of illegal sale of land by traditional leaders. The practice has been commonly known as "garawadya" which entails the selling of idle communal land by traditional leaders before the land is demarcated for regulated residential and commercial purposes. The practice has been further abused by local villagers who are selling their portions of land to urban dwellers for private projects. The practice is wholly unconstitutional and criminal according to the Communal Land Act, which states that all communal land is vested in the power of the President.

### *4.3 Environmental and Natural Resource Management*

The management of environment and natural resources is the responsibility of traditional leaders at local level. The village heads have to work hand in glove with other government agents such as the Environment Management Agency (EMA) and the Forestry Commission (FC) including elected councilors to ensure

that there is sustainable utilization of natural resources such as trees, rivers and minerals. There has been an outcry in some communities especially in the mining communities where extraction of minerals resources by foreigners has been rampant without the consultation of resident traditional leaders. The practices have resulted in some traditional leaders resorting to underhand practices such as selling of land because they are not being rewarded on the work that they had been doing in terms of environment and natural resources protection and promotion.

#### *4.4 The challenge of balancing development and coordination role*

The village heads are usually found in a tricky situation to manage both political issues and development issues. Traditional leaders are the leaders of the general citizenry at local levels who are supposed to be fair to all community members. However, because of divergent views on political views, the political parties especially the ruling party tend to take advantage of them. When the traditional leaders are supposed to play a development and coordinative role by embracing everyone in the community, there is a tendency of elimination of others on political grounds which is unconstitutional and criminal. Also, the influence of traditional leaders may not extend equally to all members of the community, particularly marginalized groups such as women and youth.

## **5. Key Lessons Learned**

- ✓ The marriage institution under the patriarchal system in rural areas of Zimbabwe empirical of the 7 districts where the traditional leaders' workshops were conducted, was highlighted to be a major barrier for women to be considered for major positions in the institution of traditional leadership. This is why only a few women have traditional leadership positions in the country, which currently stands at six female Chiefs, and 15 female headmen in the country with a total of 272 and 452 respectively<sup>1</sup>. Thus, it can be argued that this is one of many inhibiting factors why a few women-specific priorities are implemented because very few women hold the position of traditional leaders and a few men advocate for women's upliftment. In this way, if women can be encouraged and given chances to start as secretaries they can advocate for the implementation of many other women-specific priorities in the rural district councils for the good of humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/women-in-traditional-leadership>- As cited in the SADC Gender Protocol Barometer

- ✓ The institution of traditional leadership is still regarded in high esteem /regard by members of the community. For instance, members of the rural communities rely on the traditional courts in situations of conflict. The traditional courts are more accessible to and cheap for rural communities than modern courts. The traditional courts tend to emphasize reconciliation rather than retribution to ensure harmony among neighbors, relatives, and communities in rural areas.
- ✓ The dispute-resolution role of traditional leaders is widely accepted by the government and rural population. This role, however, is slowly being questioned in the light of a number of factors, including unethical and criminal conduct by some traditional leaders. The low educational levels of most traditional leaders and their inability to apply a consistent doctrine of precedent have also raised doubts about their competence and credibility as judicial officials, and this knowledge gap needs to be closed to ensure the rule of law and social justice in the communities.
- ✓ The training workshops brought present and futuristic mutual understanding between traditional leaders and relevant local authorities in order for the institutions to consult each other and engage each other in any activity to occur so that it follows correct directives when implemented.
- ✓ It is very important for local authorities to work together with the traditional leaders in ensuring that quality services are delivered to the rural communities. Projects at ward level can be monitored by the traditional leaders if they are capacitated.
- ✓ The traditional leaders are an indigenous resource who can assist in any way that needs indigenous knowledge guidelines from either the respective traditional leader or the village people.
- ✓ The relationship of traditional leaders with social accountability is fraught with tension, raising questions about their legitimacy, power dynamics, and responsiveness to the needs of their constituents.

## 6. Conclusion

The 2013 Constitution recognises the vital role which the institution of traditional leadership plays in Zimbabwe's rural governance. Traditional leaders are generally regarded and accepted as the custodians of customs and traditions entrusted to them to provide traditional guidance to their respective communities. They have a diversity of functions ranging from mere administrative functions to much more extensive judicial and development duties. Thus, the role of the institution of traditional leadership is largely still relevant to modern-day society. However, the existence of the institution parallel to modern state structures has in some cases resulted in conflicts and duplication of duties. The mechanisms established to

ensure a certain measure of integration and cooperation between the two institutions sometimes do not always bring the desired result. It is the political alignment of traditional leaders with the ruling party, however, which raises significant conflicts of interest. Despite the challenges that the institution faces, traditional leaders remain the most reachable and direct form of local governance in rural areas. Over the years, they have demonstrated remarkable resilience, a strength which the modern state should seek to capitalise on in a bid to foster development, democracy and peace. The issue of traditional leader accountability in Zimbabwe remains complex and contested. While traditional leaders play a vital role in communities, addressing the challenges and harnessing the opportunities for accountability is crucial for ensuring inclusive, responsive, and effective governance.

## 7. References

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