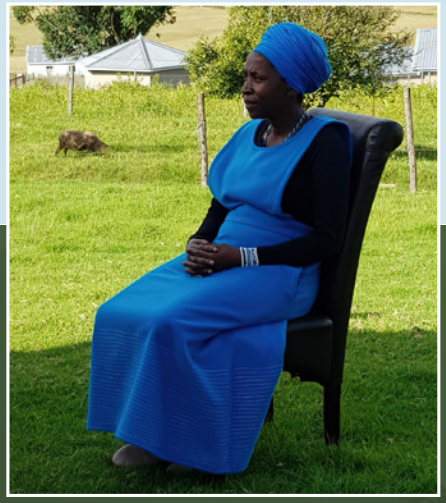
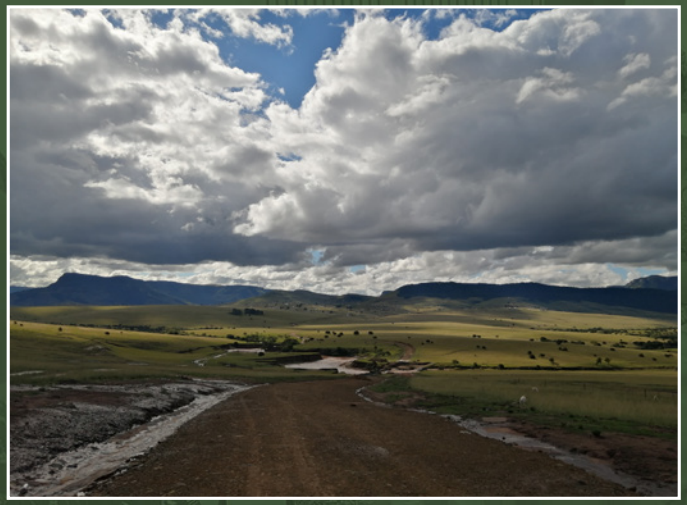
The Everyday Practices of Women Traditional Leaders in Resolving Conflicts in South Africa

A Centre for Mediation in Africa project





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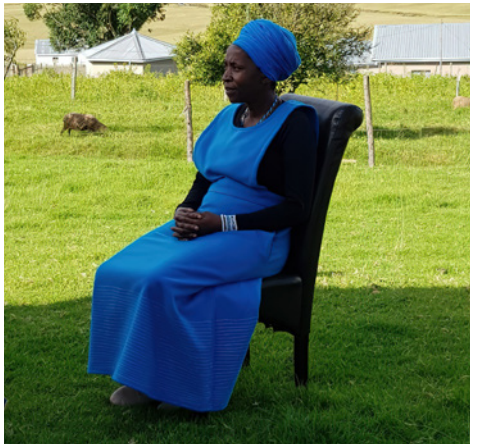

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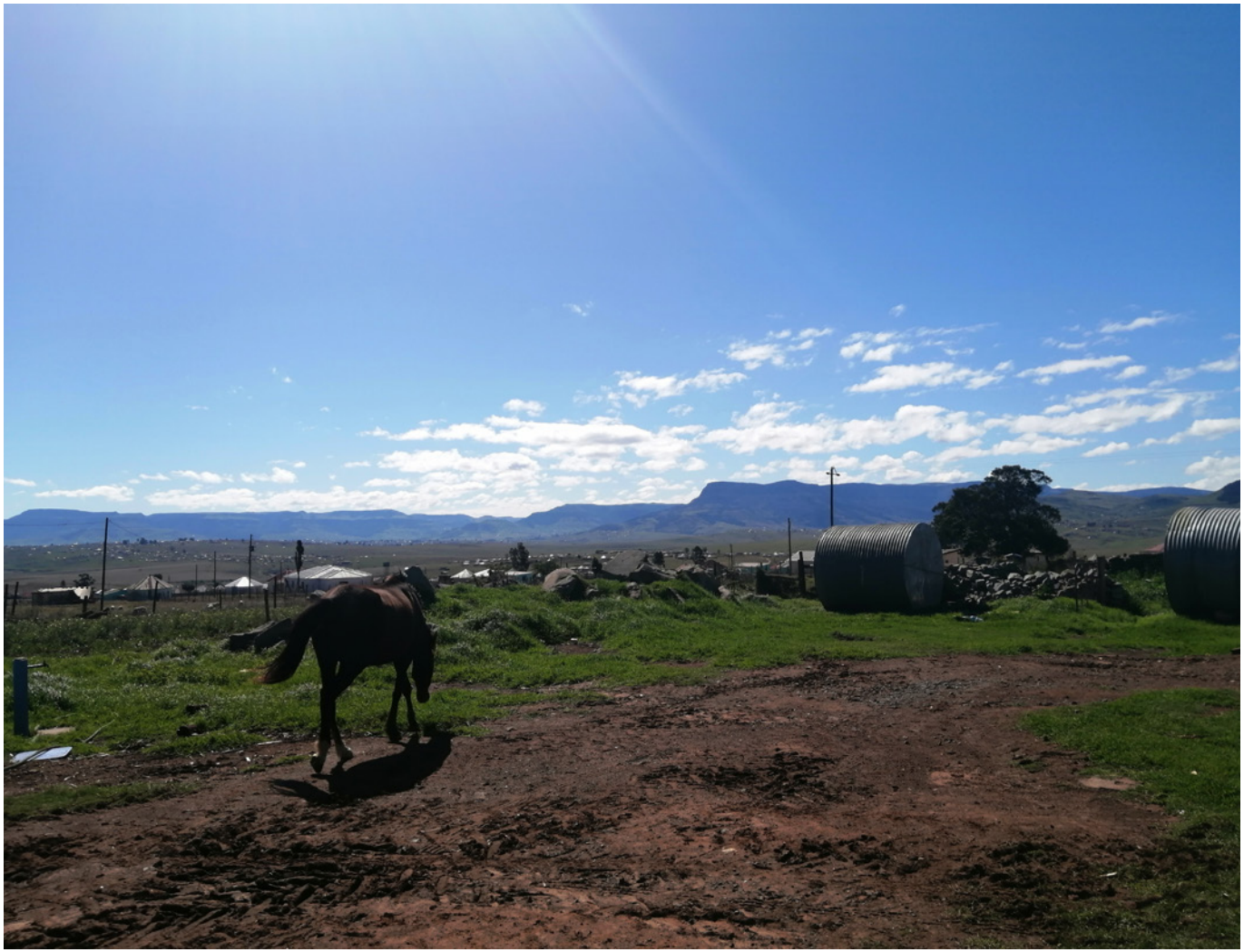

A horse walks across the gardens of the Baziya Great House (iNdlunkulu) in the King Sabata Dalindyebo Local Municipality, Eastern Cape.

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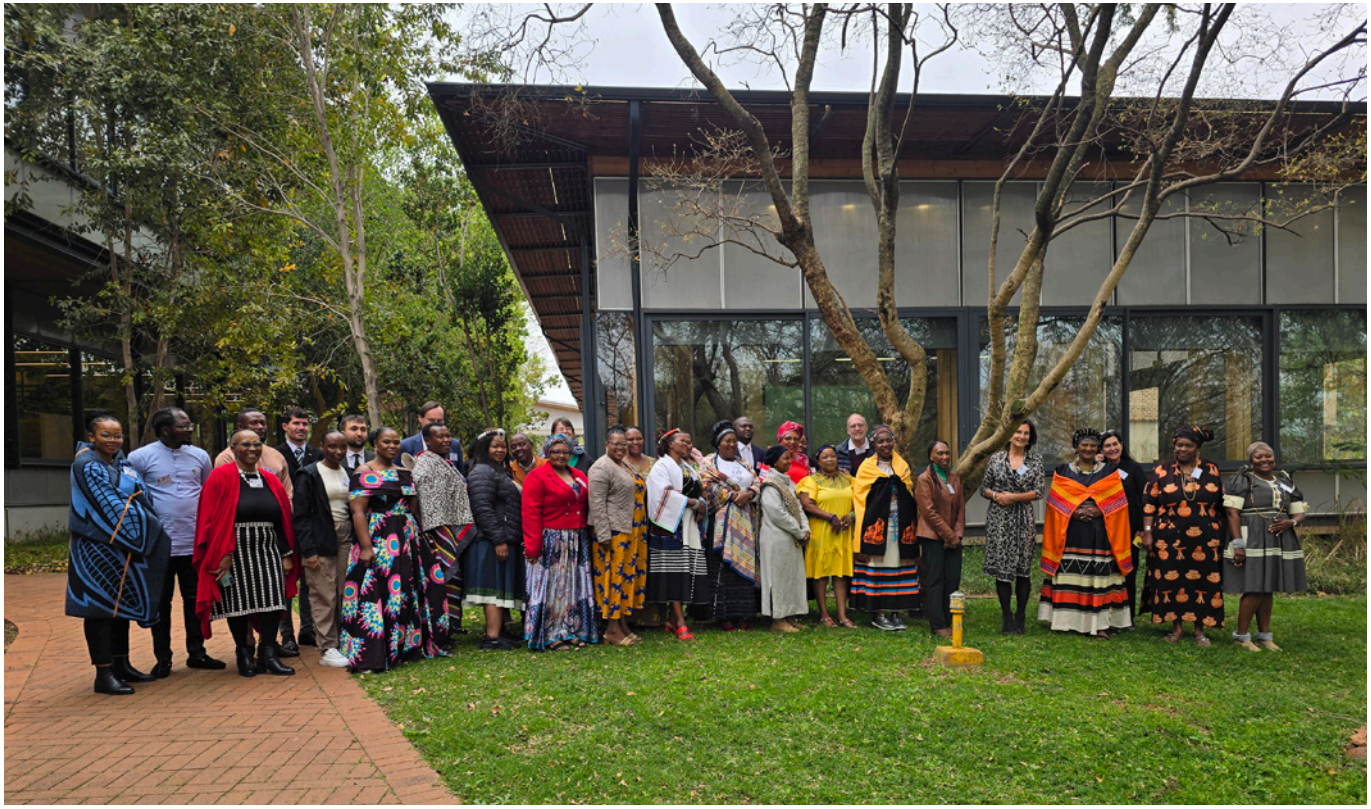

Women traditional leaders from across South Africa at an event facilitated by the CMA and supported by the Kingdom of the Embassy of the Netherlands at the University of Pretoria's Future Africa campus, 30 August 2024.

Overview

The public perception of leadership in South Africa does not often include an appreciation of the role of women traditional leaders in communities. This booklet promotes the recognition of women traditional leaders and their work in resolving conflict and building peace. It emerges from the Centre for Mediation in Africa's engagements and collaborative work with women traditional leaders across the country, ranging from Queens of the respective kingdoms to traditional leaders of rural communities. Our goal is to assist readers of this text to have a sense of the day-to-day work of women traditional leaders and appreciate their role in conflict resolution, service-delivery, stability and governance, especially in rural South Africa. As we note in a section of this booklet, 'The day-to-day work of conflict mediation that women traditional leaders, and traditional leaders more broadly, do is not widely recognised, legitimised or acknowledged. Yet it deeply reflects and resonates with the context within which it is practised.'

Although much of what we describe here is relevant to traditional leaders broadly, our focus on women brings attention to an institution that is transforming. In South Africa, women traditional leaders are at the forefront of that transformation as they actively challenge traditional norms and engage in new types of community initiatives. We begin by exploring the nature and scope of women's traditional leadership within South Africa, their day-to-day work, the rural context in which they mostly operate, cases of conflicts they have resolved and end with an outline of the principles that inform their practices followed by some recommendations. This publication largely focuses on the context of the Eastern Cape, but also draws from experiences in other parts of the country.

Insights were drawn from multiple engagements with women traditional leaders across South Africa, between 2019 and 2025. These engagements included one-on-one interviews in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, Limpopo and the Free State, as well as focus group sessions with women traditional leaders from these provinces at the University of Pretoria.

Senior women traditional leaders from KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape at the CMA's conflict resolution training, Future Africa campus, University of Pretoria, August 2024.

Women traditional leaders in South Africa

Traditional leaders, historically and until today, play a central role in the governance of rural communities in South Africa. With the advent of democracy in South Africa, and across the continent, the assumption may have been that traditional leaders would become redundant. However, the opposite seems to have happened and popular support for traditional leaders has grown.[1] Not only has popular support grown, there has also been an increase by states in the past twenty years or more to incorporate traditional leaders into the legislature and state-led governance structures.[2] This is often due to government structures not reaching the rural areas.[3]

This is certainly the case in South Africa, where traditional leaders fulfil many governance roles, and are incorporated into the country's governance structures for the purpose of service delivery, the meting out of justice through the traditional courts and the social cohesion of communities.

Within South Africa's traditional leadership structures, there have always been women traditional leaders in certain ethnic groups. Further, since 1994, legislatively, according to the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act 41 of 2003, a third of all traditional councils must be women. Thus, even in parts of the country where there may have been relatively few women traditional leaders, this is now significantly increasing.

Women often serve as queens, regents, senior traditional leaders, or senior council members. A Queen in the context of traditional leadership in South Africa, often refers to the wife of the king or a royal leader who is a woman. A Regent is a woman who temporarily assumes the leadership role of a kingdom or traditional authority when the reigning monarch is unavailable (due to death, illness or minority). Regents typically manage the kingdom's affairs until a new ruler is selected or a male heir comes of age. One notable example in South Africa was Queen Mantfombi Dlamini Zulu, the mother of King Misuzulu Zulu, who served as Regent after the death of King Zwelithini. As Regent, she was responsible for maintaining the stability and continuity of the Zulu Kingdom, which is one of South Africa's largest Kingdoms. Increasingly, there are women who are senior traditional leaders, which means that they are the head of a Traditional Council.

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1 Logan, C. 2008. Traditional leaders in modern Africa: Can democracy and the chief co-exist? Afrobarometer Working Paper No. 93.

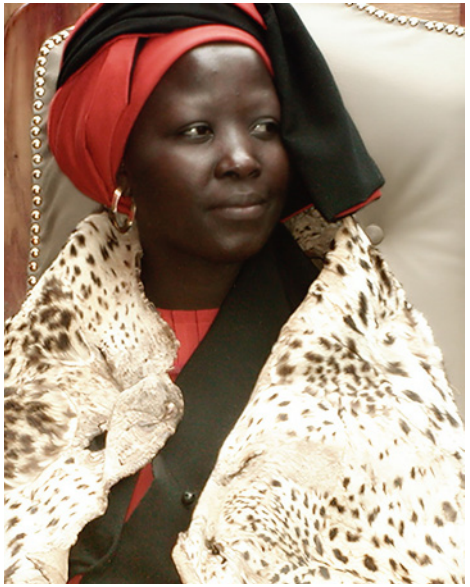
2 Hinz, M.O. 2008. Traditional governance and African customary law: comparative observations from a Namibian perspective. *Human Rights and the Rule of Law in Namibia,* pp. 59–87; Kyed, H.M. and Buur, L. 2007. Introduction: Traditional authority and democratization in Africa. In *State recognition and democratization in Sub-Saharan Africa: A new dawn for traditional authorities?* (pp. 1–28). New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.

3 Reddy, P.S. 2016. The politics of service delivery in South Africa: The local government sphere in context. *TD: The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, *12*(1): 1–8.

Although the direct translation of a woman traditional leader in isiZulu and isiXhosa is Nkosikazi, many women traditional leaders prefer to be called by the male translation of the word, Nkosi, as they believe that the position should be seen as genderless, and that whether held by a woman or a man, the position remains Nkosi. Many understand their fulfilment of the position of traditional leadership to be a calling that they are destined to fulfil. As Nkosi Nokhakha Jumba of the Jumba Traditional Council in the Eastern Cape stated, 'You are born to lead; it is not like a ward counsellor who has a term for five years because even if you want or you don't want, you are there for life, until you perish.'

COGTA officials and senior women traditional leaders at the CMA's conflict resolution training, Future Africa campus, University of Pretoria, August 2024.

One of the most well-known matrilineal lineages in South Africa where the title of Queen has been passed down through the female line is that of Kgosi Modjadji VI. Also known as the "Rain Queen", Modjadji was the leader of the Balobedu people in Limpopo and a spiritual leader believed to have the power to bring rain and ensure agricultural prosperity, where women's leadership is central to the cultural and spiritual life of the community. *(See image on page 11)* ▶



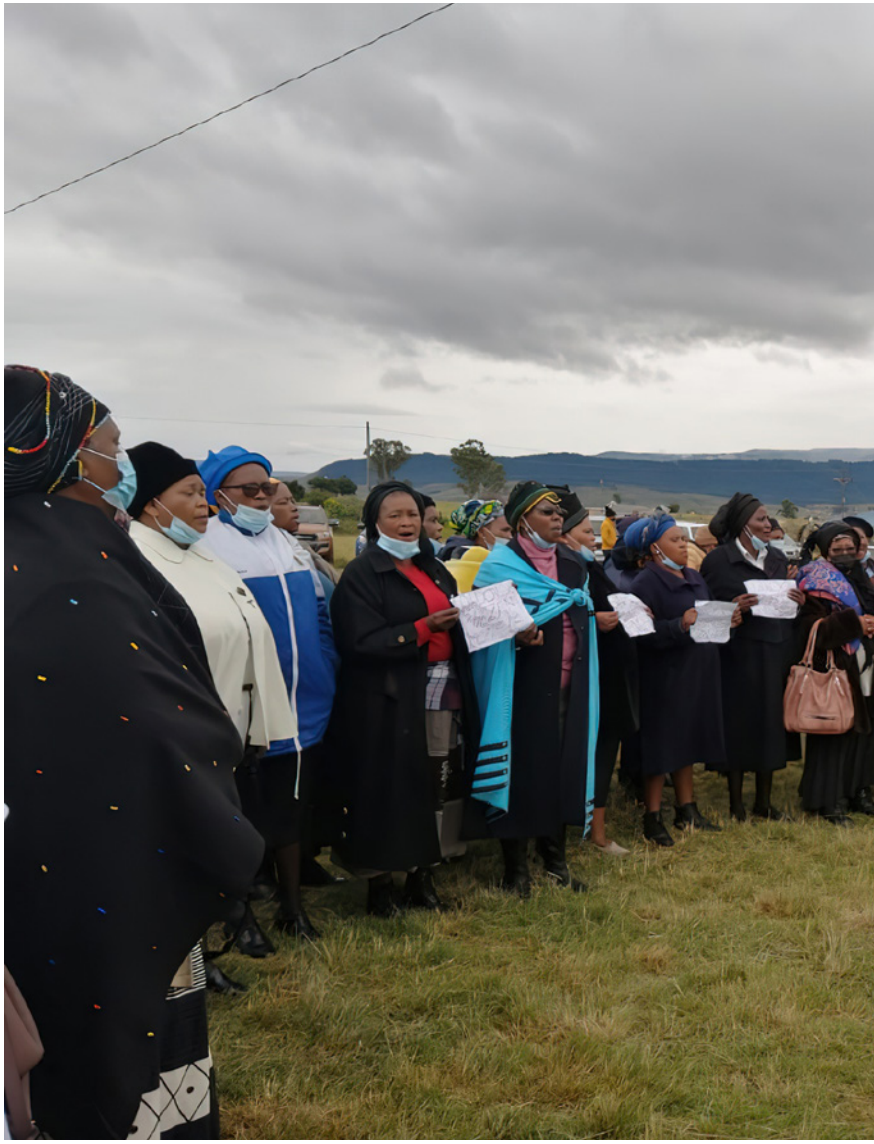
Makobo Modjadji VI (Makobo Caroline Modjadji; 22 July 1978 – 12 June 2005) was the sixth in a line of Rain Queens from the Balobedu lineage, Limpopo Province. Image by MichaelStreatonPhotography, licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

A cross section of senior traditional leaders attending an event on community resilience facilitated by the CMA at the Future Africa campus of the University of Pretoria, August 2024.

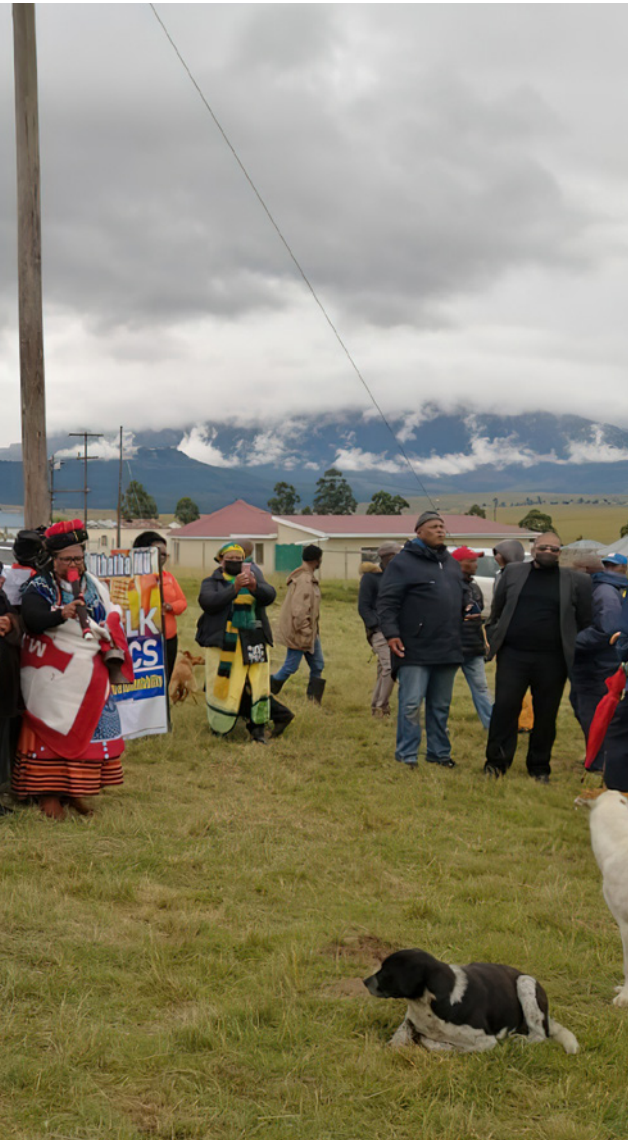
The day-to-day work of women traditional leaders

The mandate for traditional leaders in South Africa extends from leadership regarding issues of traditional governance, to building networks to support predominantly rural communities in their efforts to function effectively, despite very little formal governance support or infrastructure. Traditional leaders play important roles within their communities, contributing to governance, cultural preservation, social welfare, and economic development. As part of traditional councils, women leaders often contribute to decision-making processes related to local governance. They help advise on matters such as land allocation, resolving disputes, and community welfare.

Traditional leaders in South Africa also play a role in traditional courts or tribunals, where they help mediate and settle disputes within the community. They are often instrumental in resolving conflicts. Whether it is disputes between families, issues related to inheritance, or disagreements over land, women leaders can serve as neutral parties who help facilitate peaceful resolutions and work to foster unity and social harmony within their communities, guiding people toward collective solutions, and maintaining social order. Women traditional leaders often play a role in community development, overseeing initiatives that improve livelihoods, such as agricultural



Residents of the Baziya Traditional Council in the Eastern Cape gather to mourn the death of a young school girl, 11 April 2022.



projects, educational programmes, and health awareness campaigns. They may advocate for the sustainable use of land and natural resources to support economic activities within their communities.

Traditional leaders act as a bridge between their communities and the national levels of governance, to advocate for government support in areas such as infrastructure development, healthcare, and education. This role is particularly important in areas where the government may have limited presence or services. Furthermore, women traditional leaders play a role in ensuring that the rights of their people are recognised in the formal political system by interacting with government bodies and participating in legal reforms that address issues affecting their communities. 'When they are looking at me, they are looking at someone who knows everything, who has an ability to interpret every act and law of this country. I am their hope, even in their time of distress', says Nkosi Jumba of the Jumba Traditional Council in the Eastern Cape.

Tradition *refers to the inherited and long-standing patterns of thinking, behaviour, and practice that are transmitted from one generation to the next within a particular society or community. Tradition is fluid and contested, subject to interpretation, adaptation and change as it is reimagined by each generation. It is both a stabilising force and a dynamic process through which cultural values are maintained, challenged or transformed. Notably, in South Africa, various ethnic groups and languages are presented, with differing dynamic traditions.*

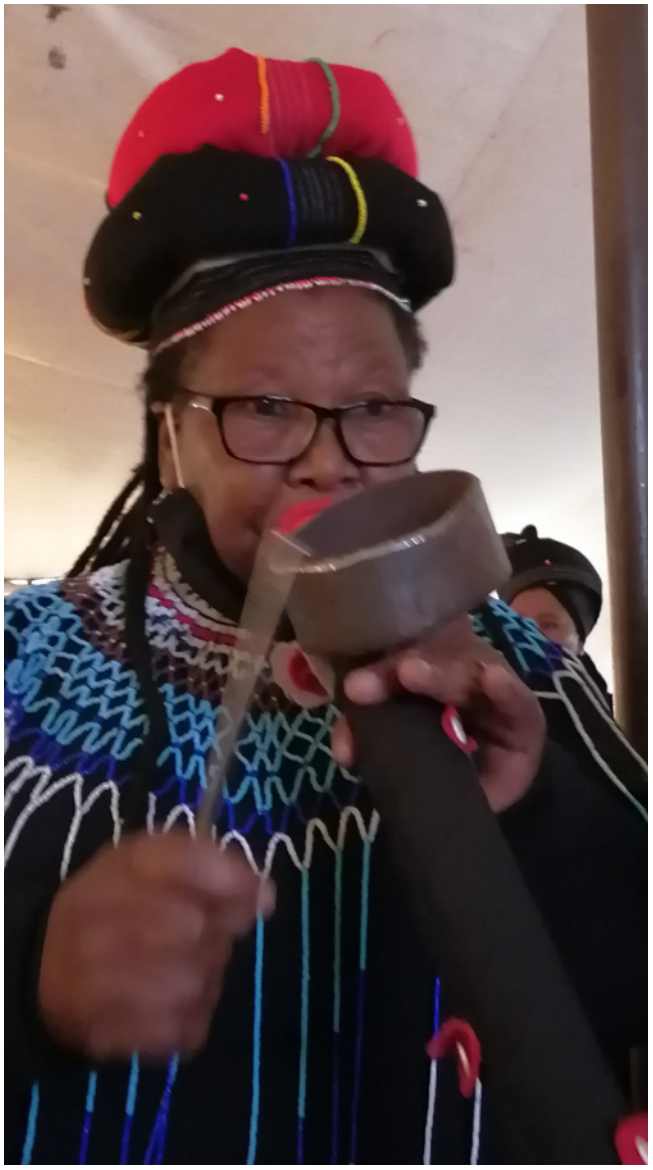
Culture is understood to be a dynamic and historically grounded system of shared and contested beliefs, values, meanings and practices actively constructed by people within communities. It encompasses the ways individuals interpret, act and relate to the world and to each other through language, rituals, roles and symbols. Culture is both a framework through which people understand their experiences and a process by which individuals and groups continuously negotiate and re-negotiate their identities and ways of life.

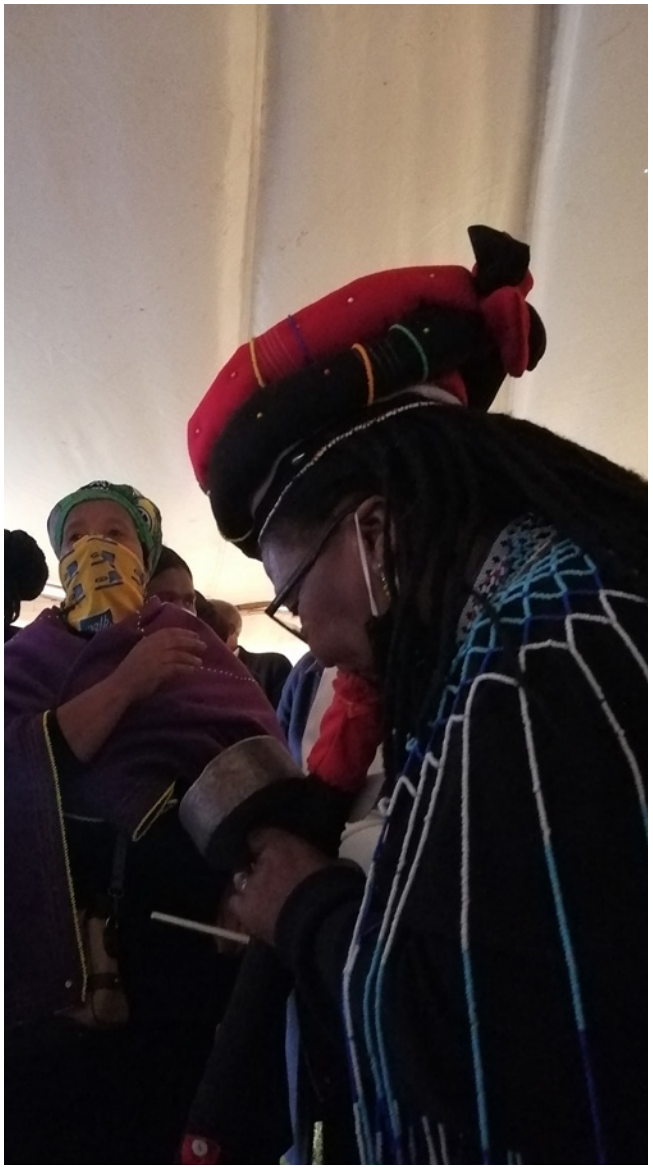
Customary law is a system of law rooted in the accepted social practices, traditions and cultural norms of a specific community, particularly those that have been observed over time and are regarded as binding. It reflects a living embodiment of localised values and expectations, often emphasising collective rights, duties and obligations over individual entitlements. As a dynamic and evolving system, customary law, or *living* customary law as it is sometimes referred to, is maintained through community consensus and continues to adapt in response to social change, while retaining its foundational link to communal life.

Conflict resolution within indigenous knowledge systems refer to the traditional, community-based systems, procedures and practices used by many African societies to address disputes, reconcile differences, and restore social harmony. Rooted in the customs and traditions of local communities, these mechanisms emphasise collective healing, truth-telling and the restoration of relationships rather than punishment. Indigenous approaches to conflict resolution encourage confession, dialogue and mutual understanding as steps toward reconciliation. These systems aim to address the underlying causes of conflict, foster forgiveness and rebuild trust within the community. As such, indigenous conflict resolution is both a restorative and culturally embedded process that prioritises social cohesion over retribution.

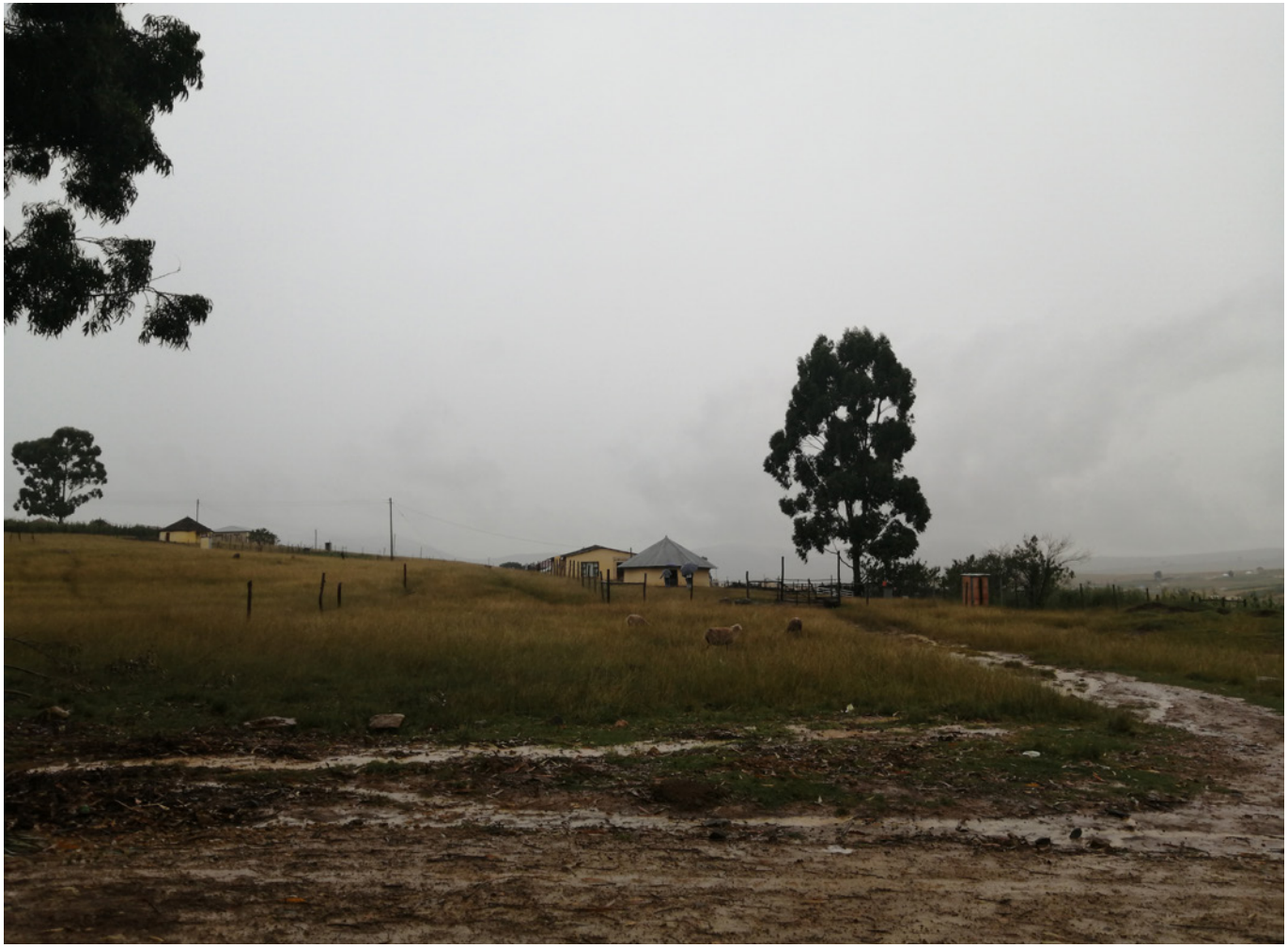
Mediation is a process in which an accepted, impartial, credible third party facilitates dialogue and negotiation between conflicting parties to help them reach a mutually acceptable resolution. It is a conflict resolution approach designed to get conflicting parties to end/suspend their conflict or reduce the risk of existing tensions escalating into conflict through non-coercive forms of peace efforts and by supporting reconciliation, settlement and social healing.

Arbitration is a formal, legally recognised method of resolving civil disputes outside of the traditional court system, in which the parties voluntarily agree—either before or after a conflict arises—to submit their dispute to a neutral third party or panel for a binding decision. Typically, traditional leaders, through traditional courts, practice arbitration.





A mouner at the funeral of an 11 year old in the Baziya Traditional Council, 11 April 2022.



An overcast day in the Jumba Traditional Council of the King Sabata Dalindyebo Local Municipality, Eastern Cape, 2022.

A beautiful, but troubled place: A look at rural South Africa

Rural South Africa consists of fourteen recognised Kingdoms, divided into traditional councils which were established to administer the affairs of a traditional community, guided by customary law and traditions, and recognised by national and provincial laws. Traditional councils play a role in development, service delivery and community involvement. There are currently 889 traditional councils in South Africa, within which approximately 20 million people, or 31 per cent of the population reside. A traditional council typically has around 12 000 households within the community that are organised into villages that are managed by subhead men and women.

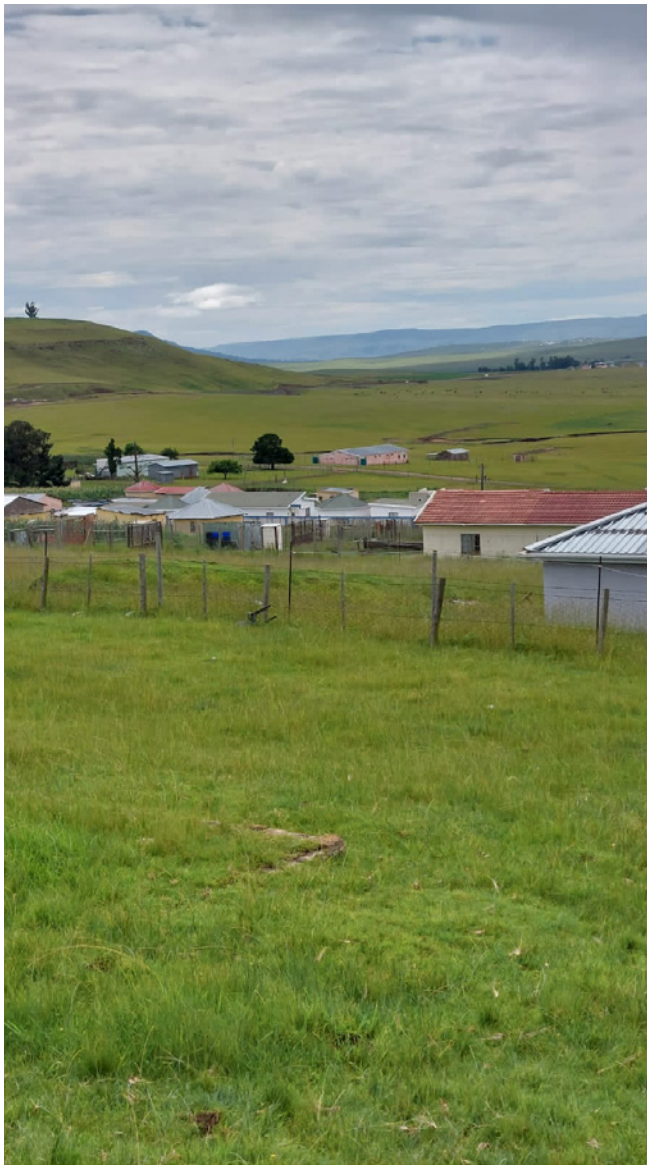
Despite the natural beauty of rural South Africa, the legacy of Apartheid is starkly evident in the continued under development of these parts of the country. Due to the migrant labour system that prevailed during Apartheid, many working-age people, particularly men, are away from their traditional councils for long periods of time to work in mines or farms far from their homes. Many South Africans have now settled in urban centres; however, they maintain ties to their rural homes.

Within traditional councils, there is an absence of working-age men and women, which is evident in a critical demographic being absent from the day-to-day functioning of village life, from governance to domestic matters. An area that is particularly affected is that of security, where there is an increase of gangsterism among young adults, amidst an absence of policing. Gender-based violence is also high. Most roads are not tarred, and become difficult to navigate after heavy rains, making access for policing and other services even more challenging. Most people live on the breadline, and must walk long distances to access schools, clinics, police stations or magistrate's courts. Basic service delivery is often compromised, and households are often without water or electricity (in the few rural areas that are connected to the grid) for long periods of time.

Amidst this, many people, from youth leaders to pastors to self-help cooperatives, continue to work to bring peace and development to their communities. It is in this context that women traditional leaders are resolving conflicts between community members, as well as between their traditional council's and external parties (such as service providers).

Conflict resolution in indigenous knowledge systems

Indigenous knowledge systems and culture play a significant and often transformative role in conflict resolution in traditional councils. These systems are deeply rooted in the values, traditions and practices of local communities, and they offer alternative, context-specific methods for resolving disputes and restoring social harmony. In the case of South Africa, indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices provide frameworks that prioritise reconciliation, mediation

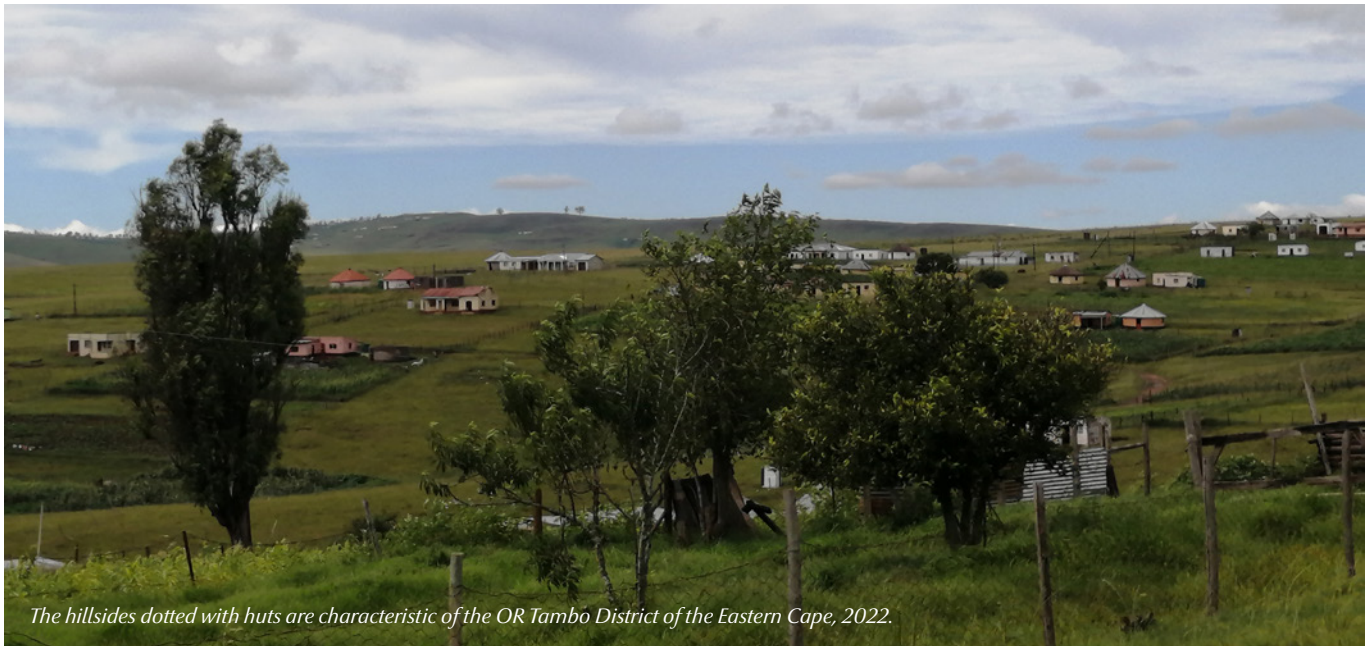


and community engagement, all of which can help resolve conflicts in ways that are aligned with cultural values and social cohesion.

Conflict resolution within indigenous knowledge systems often emphasises restoration of relationships rather than retribution. The goal is to repair harm and restore peace, rather than to alienate someone through, for example, imprisonment. This approach is rooted in a restorative approach that aims to heal both the victim and the offender, ensuring that the community can move forward in harmony. Further, conflict resolution is a communal process that encourages the participation of all relevant stakeholders. The resolution focuses on rebuilding relationships and ensuring that all parties are reintegrated into the social fabric. The focus is on understanding, empathy, and finding ways to harmonise conflicting interests, rather than imposing a singular viewpoint.

Traditional leaders play a critical role in conflict resolution by acting as mediators, arbitrators, and facilitators of dialogue. These respected figures are trusted by the community to offer wisdom, impartiality and fairness. Traditional leaders create spaces for open communication, where all parties involved in the conflict can express their views, with the goal being to reach a consensus that works for everyone.

Within the South African context, traditional leaders must often address historical injustices that have caused division within communities, such as colonialism, land



The hillsides dotted with huts are characteristic of the OR Tambo District of the Eastern Cape, 2022.

dispossession, and the trauma of Apartheid. By utilising indigenous knowledge systems, women leaders engage in processes that allows for communities to acknowledge past wrongs, seek reconciliation and promote healing. Part of resolving these historical conflicts involves restoring dignity to marginalised or oppressed individuals and groups. In many cases, this means ensuring that the voices of women, youth and other marginalised people are heard and that their needs are addressed.

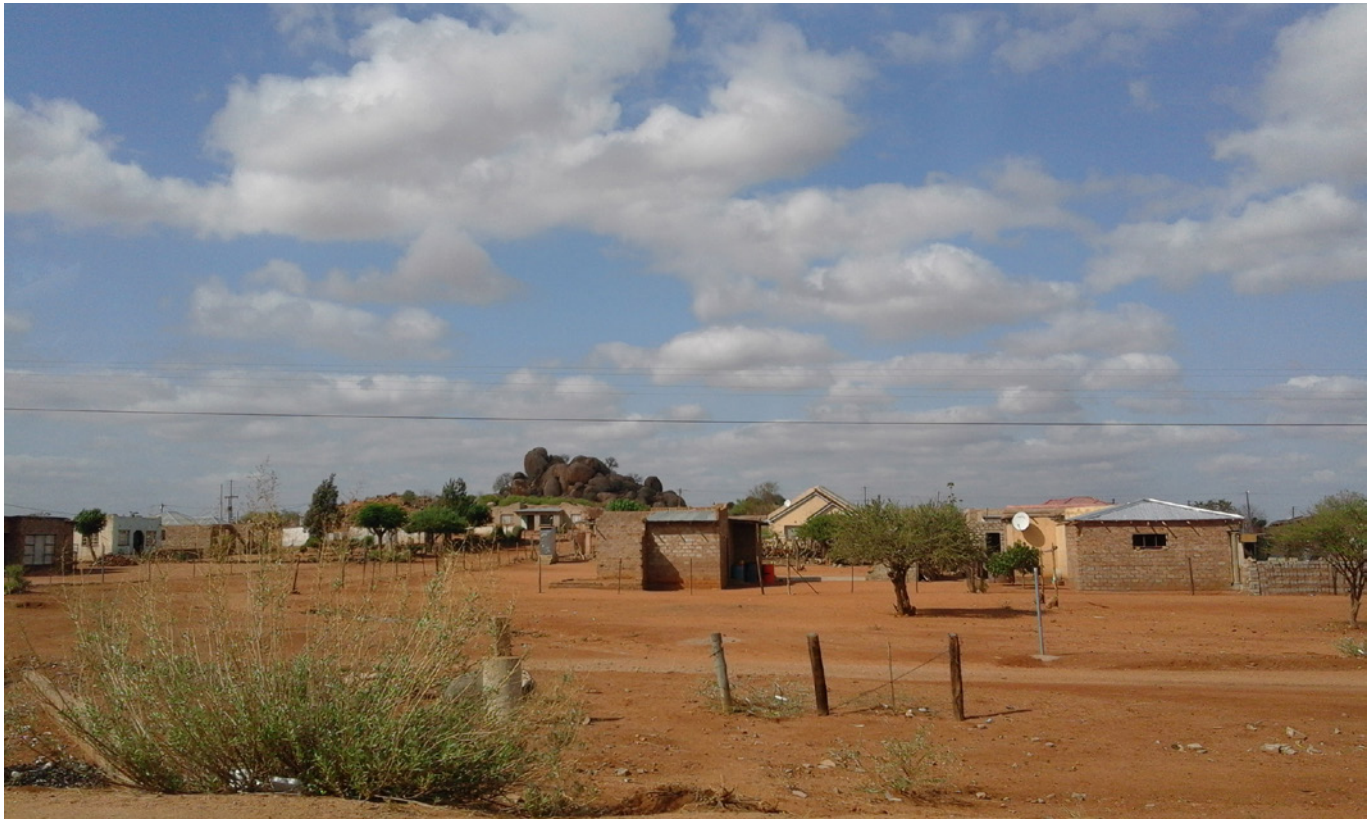
Resultantly, indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices offer valuable frameworks to women traditional leaders for conflict resolution that prioritise reconciliation, social harmony and community-based solutions. These approaches have the potential to foster understanding, heal past wounds and promote long-term peace, both within communities and in broader societal contexts. By combining traditional practices with modern approaches, women traditional leaders in South Africa can use indigenous conflict resolution methods to continue to play a vital role in restoring balance and resolving disputes in their traditional councils.

Formality and informality

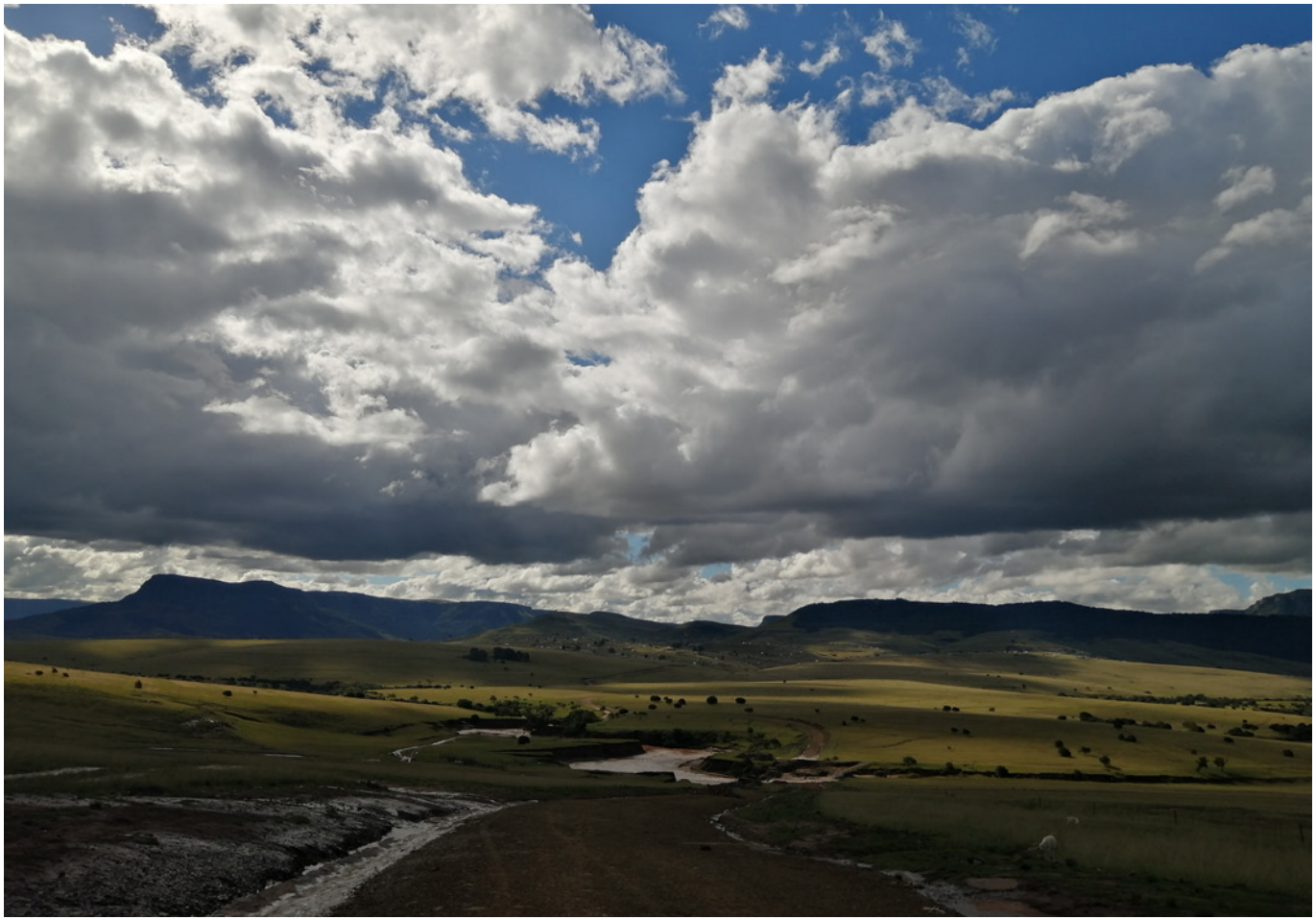
Conflict resolution in indigenous systems is often assumed to be "informal" when in fact it involves high levels of regulation and formality. This brings us to question the way we understand "formal" and "informal" justice and governance systems. Conflict mediation by traditional leaders, especially in South Africa, is often criticised for being autocratic and undemocratic, but again, this speaks to how we understood democracy, rights, and justice.[4] Engaging with conflict mediation by traditional leaders on its own terms, and through the lens of relational approaches to mediation (as opposed to, for example, from a legal perspective) offers rich insights into the creative, innovative, transformative, and relational ways in which conflicts are resolved.

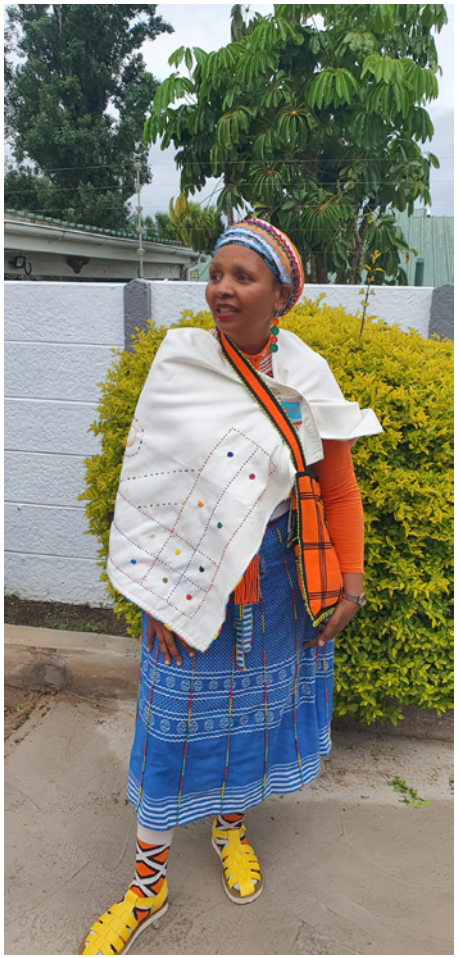
A dialogue between key stakeholders in peace, security and development facilitated by the CMA in Mthatha, Eastern Cape, 18 Oct 2023.

4 Notably, Ubink and Duda (2021) argue that part of the reason why traditional leadership in South Africa today has become undemocratic, is because of the 'ahistorical and authoritarian understanding of customary law and customary leadership' reflected in post-1994 laws and government interventions. The authors argue that the way people themselves understand customary leadership is different from the way the government does, as reflected in its legislation. Ubink, J. and Duda, T. 2021. Traditional authority in South Africa: Reconstruction and resistance in the Eastern Cape. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, *47*(2), 191–208.



The stark landscape of the Sekhukhune District Municipality, Limpopo where many Mpedi senior traditional leaders are women.





Nkosi Gwebindlala Jaxa of the Jalamba Traditional Council

Hybrid governance and justice systems

'We operate in ways that do allow community's to function in support of the constitution. We lead according to the constitution', states Nkosi Mpungose from KwaZulu-Natal.[5] While indigenous conflict resolution systems are deeply rooted in tradition, traditional councils operate within the governance frameworks of South Africa. South Africa operates under a dual governance system where traditional leadership structures work alongside the formal legal system to ensure that conflicts are resolved in ways that respect both cultural practices and the country's Constitution. The 1996 Constitution provided the authority for customary law to be recognised as an official source of law, fully functional throughout the judicial system.

In terms of the role of traditional leaders in local governance, the Municipal Structures Act (117 of 1998) stipulates that traditional leadership must be allowed to attend and participate in any council meeting and be consulted by council before any decisions that affect their traditional authority is taken.[6] The Local Government Act (32 of 2002) emphasises that traditional leaders and communities must be given a chance to participate in

5 Nkosi Mpungose, 2019 Personal interview, Pretoria. KwaZulu-Natal.

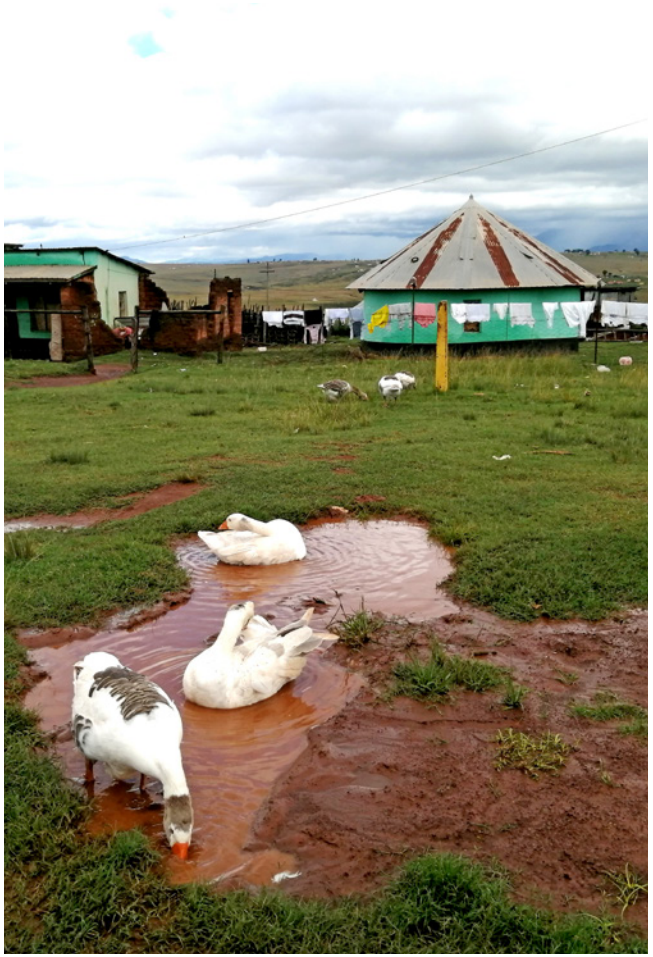
6 Pikirayi, S.P. 2022. *The roles, functions and powers of traditional leaders in cooperative governance in the Vhembe district municipality, in the Limpopo province, post 1994.* (Masters dissertation, University of Pretoria).

Princess Lesedi Mamushi from the Sekhukhune District, Limpopo, Nkosikazi Noluntu Ndamase from the Nyandeni Kingdom, Eastern Cape and Ward Counsellor Limakatso Molakalaka from the Mthatha area, Eastern Cape during the CMA-facilitated conflict resolution training in August, 2023.

decision making, however, following on these policies, it was evident that the roles and responsibilities of traditional leaders in relationship to local government structures, remained unclear. Further policy documents were developed to clarify the roles and responsibilities of traditional leaders in governance structures in the form of the White Paper on Traditional Leadership and Governance of 2003 and the Traditional and Khoi-San Leadership Act of 2019.

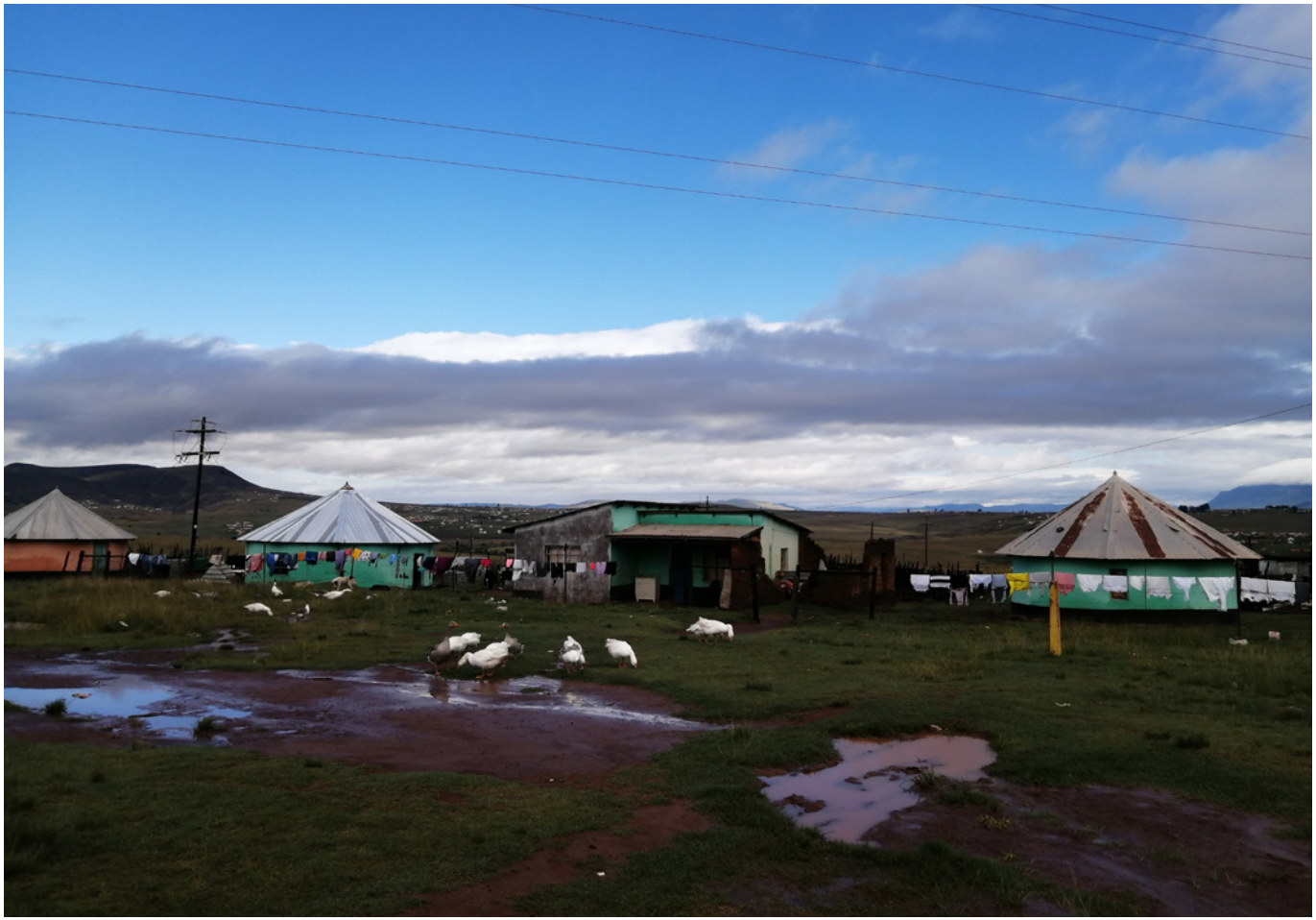
The interaction between traditional and formal systems of governance is, however, a complex and evolving relationship. Despite legal recognition, tensions often arise between traditional and formal governance systems in relation to jurisdiction and authority in the communities they serve, particularly regarding land use, resource management, the rights of children and the enforcement of local laws.

Customary law, which traditional leaders often apply in resolving disputes, may at times conflict with South African common law, particularly with regards to issues such as inheritance, marriage and property rights. For example, inheritance laws under customary law may allow practices that are not in alignment with the stance of the formal legal system on equality and property rights, especially in terms of women's rights. In some areas, there are challenges in aligning the practices of traditional leadership with the requirements of formal governance systems, leading to inconsistencies in service delivery, governance structures, and legal frameworks.



There are, however, also instances where traditional leaders and the formal system collaborate to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes in their communities. Platforms like the National House of Traditional Leaders (NHTL) allow traditional leaders to meet with government officials to discuss policies and issues affecting rural areas. The NHTL serves to ensure that the interests of traditional communities are represented at the national level. The legal recognition of traditional leadership ensures that these systems work together in a complementary manner, particularly in rural areas. Collaborative efforts between traditional leaders and the formal government continue to evolve, ensuring that both systems can play vital roles in the country's governance and development.

An example of this collaboration was a structure established through the influence of the late Minister Zola Skweyiya, which has been instrumental in assisting rural women through different programmes. In the Eastern Cape it was referred to as *Imbumba ya Makhosikazi akoMkhulu*, and in KwaZulu-Natal *Umgogodlo ka Zulu*. "*Imbumba*" became a useful vehicle for government departments to work with traditional leaders to respond to numerous issues in society. The Department of Health, for example, has used it to address teenage pregnancy, women who do not attend antenatal clinics, women who consume alcohol while pregnant, and other related awareness campaigns. Programmes undertaken under the umbrella of *Imbumba* are well supported by rural women, since people are familiar with it.



A rainsoaked Eastern Cape landscape.

The challenges women traditional leaders face

Despite that the National House of Traditional Leaders has been led by a woman, Nkosi Nomanda Mhlauli (2021-2022) and that women are being increasingly recognised in their leadership roles, women continue to face barriers such as patriarchal structures, gender-based violence, and limited access to land and resources. Women in traditional leadership roles must often navigate these societal challenges while balancing the preservation of culture with modern demands for gender equality. As a woman traditional leader put it, 'People expect you to resolve conflict like a mother, but to fight like a man'.[7]

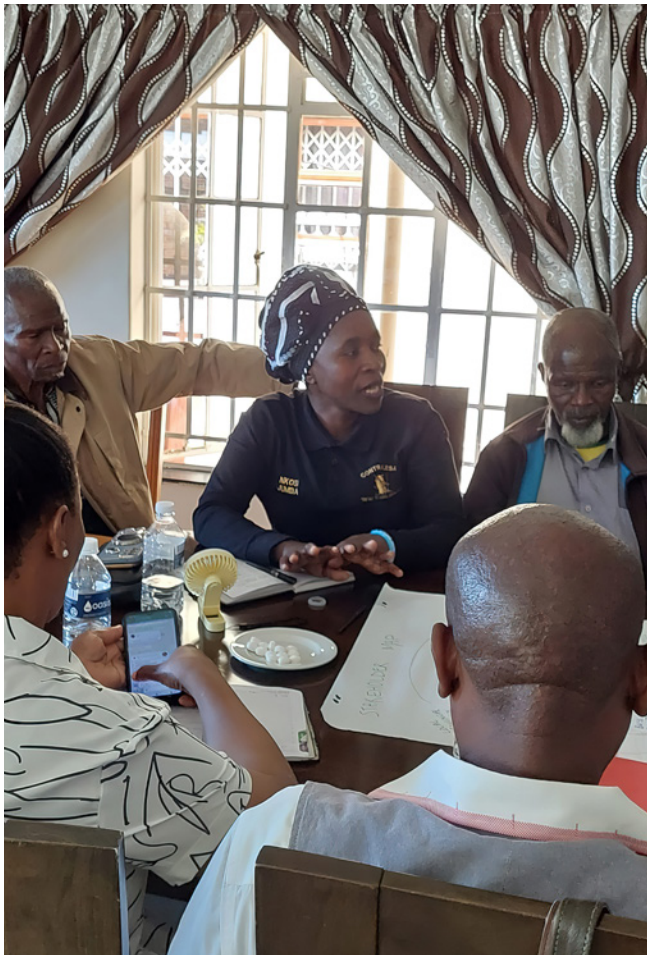
Apart from a lack of clarity concerning the roles of traditional leaders in policy frameworks, and a lack of access to state funding and decision-making processes, women traditional leaders often face multiple forms of resistance from municipalities, other traditional leaders and community members themselves. Where some women traditional leaders have been wholeheartedly accepted by their constituents, others have had to struggle to serve their communities amidst threats to their lives and the active undermining of their work by those who reject women in this leadership role.[8]

The presence of these women as traditional leaders is symbolic of ongoing shifts in South Africa, where the roles of women in leadership, especially in rural and traditional communities, continue to grow and evolve. In the words of one of the Queens, 'We are not just ceremonial figures and we are not trophy wives. We have brains, passion and drive, and we take our work seriously'.[9] Overall, women traditional leaders in South Africa are vital pillars of their communities, contributing to cultural preservation, social stability, economic development, and gender advocacy. Their leadership continues to evolve as they work to balance tradition with progress in a changing world.

In communities where women have historically held leadership roles, such as in matrilineal cultures, empowerment comes from cultural recognition and respect. In these spaces, women's roles as leaders—whether as traditional leaders, queens, spiritual leaders or elders—are formalised and respected within the community, most often as a birthright. On the other hand, in communities where gender roles are rigid, women traditional leaders face resistance or limitations from patriarchal structures. These barriers can be overcome when women traditional leaders have their roles formally recognised within the community's political structures, which are in turn, supported by community customs and practices.

Women in traditional leadership positions are often empowered through their relationship with the community.

7 Nkosi Nokhakha Jumba. 2024. Personal interview. Pretoria.
8 Sithole, P. and Mbele, T. 2008. Fifteen year review on traditional leadership: A research paper. Human Science Research Council, Pretoria.
9 South African Queen. 2025. Personal interview, Pretoria.

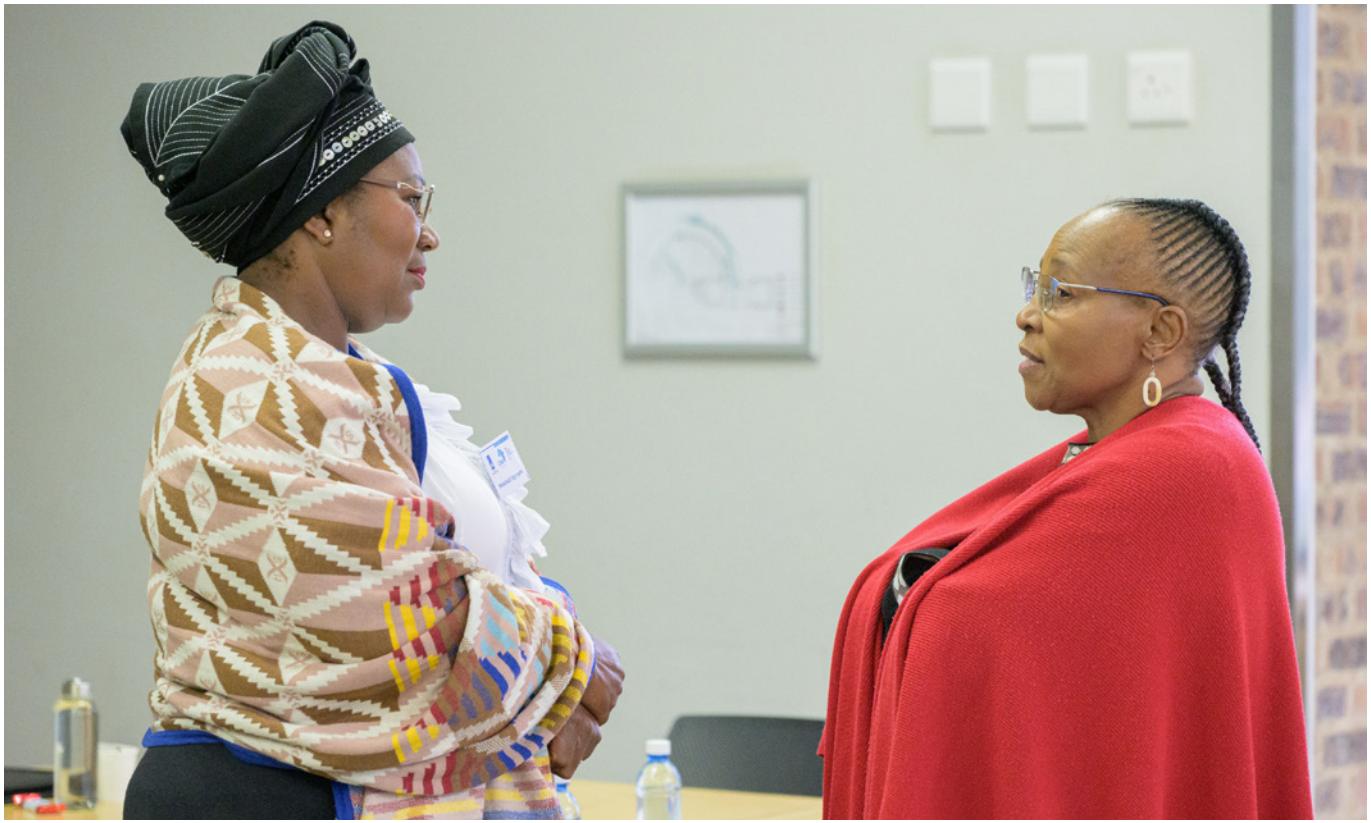


Nkosi Nokhakha Jumba of the Jumba Traditional Council speaks about her work as woman traditional leader at the CMA facilitated stakeholder dialogue in Mthatha, Eastern Cape, 18 October 2023.

Empowerment comes from the trust and respect they earn from their communities through their actions, wisdom and contributions. By being actively involved in community development, social justice, and dispute resolution, women build their reputation as effective leaders. In some communities, women have access to and control over economic assets like land, livestock or markets. This allows women to build economic power, which strengthens their influence in decision-making processes.

Women traditional leaders often play a central role in preserving cultural heritage, spiritual practices, and indigenous knowledge. Their agency in this domain ensures that important cultural elements are passed down through generations. The women traditional leaders spoken to indicated how they would often help preserve and promote cultural practices, rituals and customs that are important to their communities.

In South Africa, women traditional leaders play a vital role in their communities, including assisting with accessing education and playing a crucial role in promoting education, particularly for girls and young women, by leveraging their influence within communities to advocate for access to education and address barriers to learning. They often serve as role models and mentors for young women, demonstrating the importance of education and the possibilities afforded to them.



Nkosi(kazi) Ngonyama of the Cacadu Traditional Authority in the Eastern Cape speaks with Nomonde Keswa of Conflict Dynamics at a CMA facilitated event at the Future Africa campus, University of Pretoria, August 2024.

Cases women traditional leaders have solved

Cases that women traditional leaders have solved give one insight into how conflict resolution within a traditional council function. What emerges from these cases is that the focus of the intervention is the restoration of the relationships.

The first case involves a senior traditional leader in the Mthatha area of the Eastern Cape confronted with a dispute over goats. In this dispute, an elderly woman had a goat that found a way to break through the fence and into the maize fields of the neighbour, a young man. The traditional leader explained how goats have a way of rubbing their bodies against metal fences, warming the metal that way, and then using their horns to break the metal when it is soft. After this had happened several times, the young man who had the maize fields slaughtered the goat and ate it. The case was escalated from the headman to the traditional leader. The traditional leader asked three questions of the elderly woman and the young man, separately: if you were in my shoes, how would you handle this situation? If you were in the shoes of the person you are in a dispute with, how would you handle this situation? What outcome would you like to see at the end of this process?

At the start of the process, the young man was confident that he was in the right, partly because of his standing in the community and the support he was receiving from others in the community. However, as he considered the dispute from the perspective of the elderly woman, he conceded that he would not have liked to have someone else slaughter his goat, regardless of what it might have done. The elderly woman, in turn, conceded that she should have worked harder to prevent her goat from continuously breaking through the fence and eating the neighbour's maize. The young man agreed to compensate the elderly woman for her goat, but asked for time to do this as he did not have the means to do so immediately. In time, the young man did compensate the woman, and the woman reported that the young man sometimes buys groceries for her when she is too frail to go out.

The three questions the senior traditional leader asked, points to a desire to develop empathy, compassion and perspective. None of these questions are about what is wrong or right in the situation, however, each speaks to understanding the other more deeply. At one stage in the telling of the story, the traditional leader said, 'I knew both had the intention of making things right'. Once again, the focus of the story and its resolution was on the relationship between the elderly woman and the young man.

Yet another story about a goat was shared by a senior traditional leader from KwaZulu-Natal. In this dispute, the accusation is that the hunting dog of a young man in the community has been killing the neighbour's goats. The neighbour in turn, killed the hunting dog. The sub-headman's ruling was that it was just a killing of a dog, and the value of a goat is higher than that

A number of the South African Queens and Professor Cori Wielenga, director of the CMA at the University of Pretoria's Future Africa campus, March 2025.

of a dog. The case was then escalated by the owner of the dog to the senior traditional leader. The traditional leader began by ascertaining the facts, which included that there was no evidence that the dog was in fact killing the goats. Further, it was clarified that the value of a hunting dog is much higher than members of the community realised, in fact higher than that of a goat (an amount of around R30 000 was mentioned in relation to the hunting dog, and R2 000 per goat killed). After much discussion about the situation with the disputants, it was finally decided that a fine of R5 000 would be paid by both parties to one another as a gesture of goodwill and reconciliation between them, as there was no way to determine the guilt of either party beyond reasonable doubt. Both parties were instructed to take the R5 000 home to show their families, so that going forward, they would know that there is peace between them, and their children would be able to play freely with one another without the dispute hanging over them.

The necessity of taking the fine paid home to show the family was emphasised as being critical, as otherwise the children of the neighbouring households would not be able to play with one another anymore. From what was stated by the senior traditional leader relating this story, the exchange of a fine of equal amounts is a standard gesture in such situations that the community is familiar with. Establishing the good relations between the parties is once again more important than establishing who was right or wrong.

A slightly unusual case involves another senior traditional leader from the Mthatha area of the Eastern Cape, who recounted the story of two brothers who were neighbours and did not see eye-to-eye. Both typically hunt for food in the forest, and one day one brother accuses the hunting dog of the other brother of biting his goat that was grazing in the forest. The case was brought to the senior traditional leader, who started by calming the men, ascertaining the facts, and helping them find common ground. One brother continued to deny that his dog bit the goat, and there is no evidence that the dog bit the goat. The senior traditional leader concluded that there is no conclusive position that can be taken, however, the brothers need to find peace. After bringing the long conversation between the brothers to an end, with moderate results, the dog owner admitted that his dog *had* bitten the goat, and they had brought the case to the traditional leader to test her.

What is apparent in this case is that the brothers wanted to know whether their traditional leader was trustworthy and capable of handling a dispute of this kind. Noteworthy here is that the senior traditional leader, after initially being angry at being tested, quickly understood why the brothers had done this. She laughed as she recounted the story, and understood the significance of the moment within the life of the community she served.

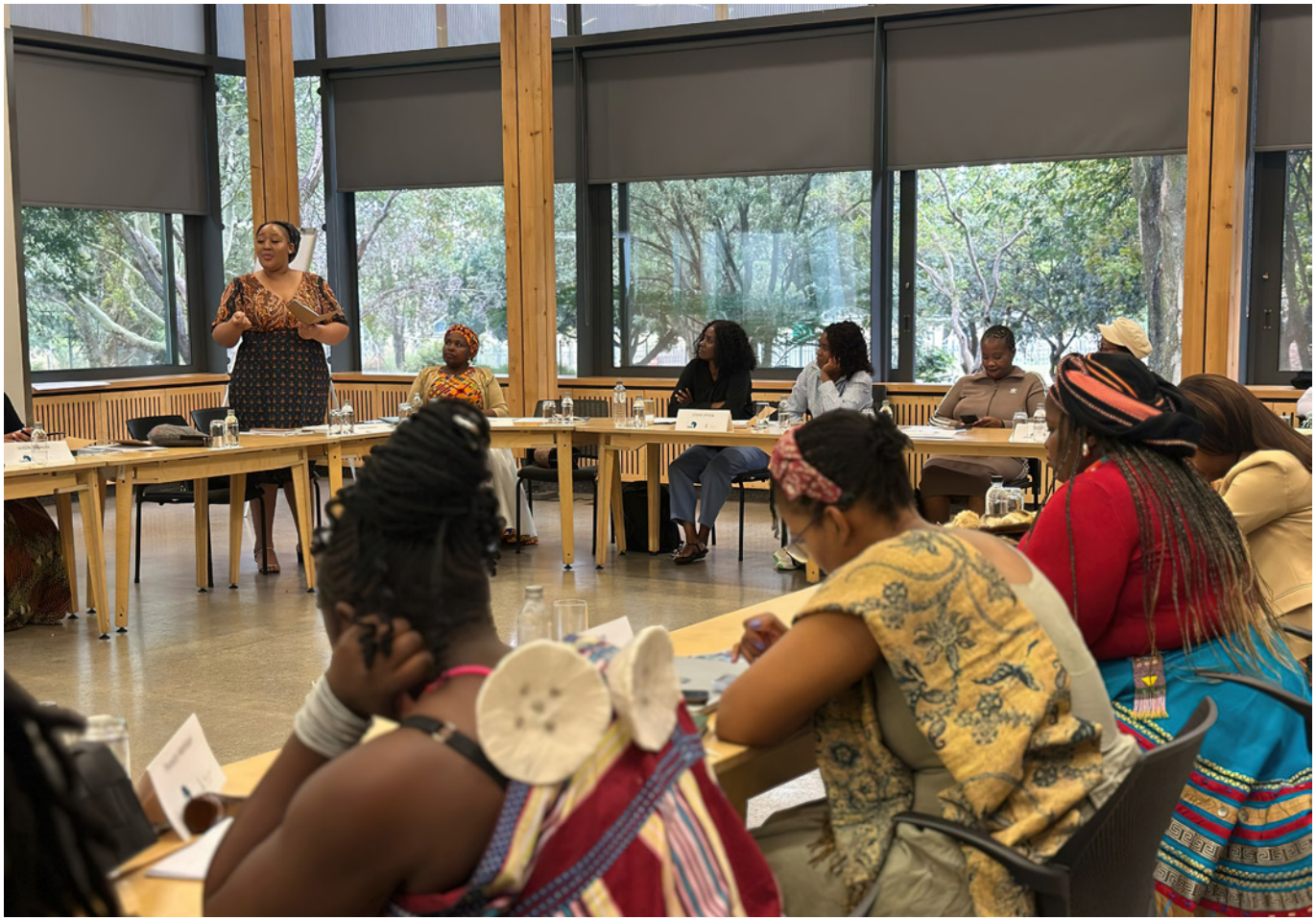
In the Venda area of Limpopo, a senior traditional leader was approached by neighbours who had a dispute about their boundary wall. One of the neighbours was an elderly woman with no children. The other was a woman alone with an older

son. The son was the one instigating the dispute, with accusations that the boundary wall had encroached onto their stand. The case was escalated to the senior traditional leader, who started by trying to ascertain the facts. It became apparent that although the son had a lot to say about the dispute, the stand belonged to the mother and not the son. The traditional leader asked the son to leave the conversation so that the two women could talk. Between them, there seemed to be no dispute, however, the mother of the son stated that she was afraid to concede that the boundary wall should remain where it was as the son would accuse her of being "too soft". As the son was seen as being the instigator of the dispute, and the neighbour was a woman alone, it was suggested that the son spend time in the neighbour's garden, helping her with her gardening as a form of "punishment" for having caused an unnecessary dispute in the first place.

What is apparent in this case is that the focus of the resolution was, once again, not on who was wrong or right, but on the relationship. Requesting the son to work in the garden of the neighbour meant that the son was compelled to build a relationship with the neighbour, and because the request came from the traditional leader, it was a request that the son would have to respect and follow.

Mourners at a funeral for a young school girl in Baziya Traditional Council, April, 2022.

Women's groups in the Baziya Traditional Council address mourners at the funeral of a young school girl, April, 2022.



Queen Mabhena of the Ndebele Kingdom addresses the Queens and COGTA officials at a CMA facilitated training event, February, 2025.

Conflict resolution by women traditional leaders

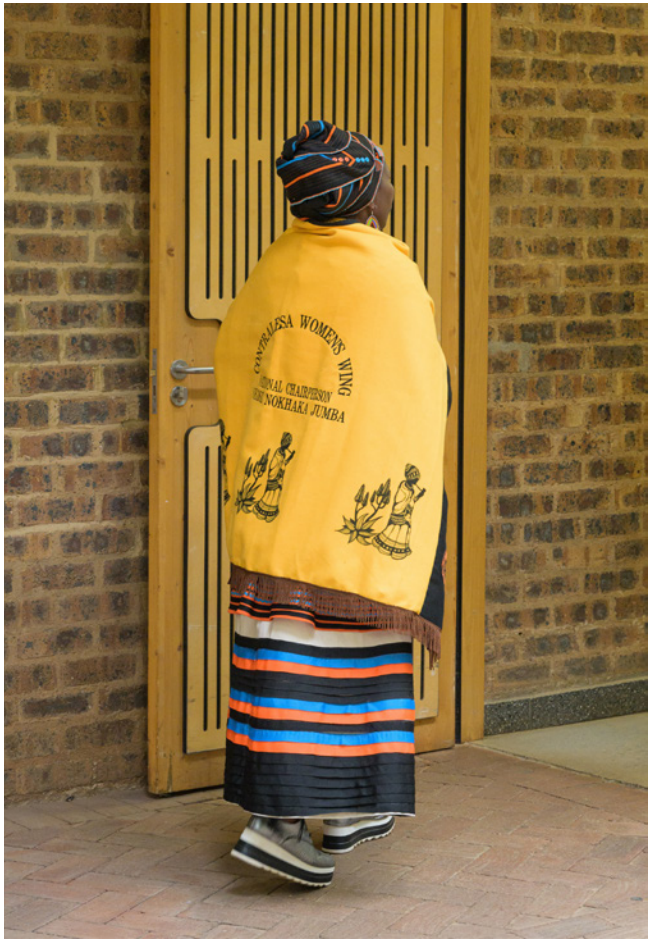
There are several things that can be drawn from these stories. The first is that the focus is on **the restoration of a relationship,** often not only between direct disputants, but with the whole community, keeping the traditional leaders themselves, in mind as well. In this context, the resolution of conflict is not about individual accountability, or the social contract between an individual and the state or the rights and duties of a citizen (as it would be in a system grounded in Roman-Dutch law), but about restoring social harmony and the balance in the web of relationships that are integral to the survival of the community.[10]

The restorative impulse of people, and the intuitive recognition of this restorative impulse in people, or the assumption by the traditional leader that with some prompting it will emerge, is also in evidence,[11] drawing from her work with Native American and First Nations people, describes the restorative impulse as that which compels people towards 'being in good relationship with one another'. The assumption is not that people necessarily want to avoid responsibility or "get away" with what they have done; it is that people within the community want to restore the relationships that have been disrupted. The prevailing discourse is one of human dignity over human rights,[12] and an understanding of the interconnectedness between people.

In addition to this is evidence that cases are escalated according to a very **specific hierarchical structure of leadership**. It is for this reason that there are sometimes concerns with defining dispute resolution at the community level as being "informal", when in fact it involves high levels of regulation and formality.[13] The levels of escalation evident in the stories shared by women traditional leaders offers a degree of check-and-balance, or a system of recourse, within the dispute resolution system. In the telling of the stories, traditional leaders made mention of the fact that after gathering the facts, they would consult with their councils, or with traditional leaders in other communities that they trusted. Thus, structures of support were in evidence.

Finally, **the authority that comes with the position of being a traditional leader** was clearly utilised by the traditional leaders in resolving the disputes. Strictly speaking, what they were engaged with was somewhere between arbitration and mediation, where on the one hand, they were mediating a dialogue between disputants. On the other hand, they were also, in the final instance, arbitrating a decision based on their own understanding of the facts, the relational dynamics, their own

10 Wielenga, C. and Nshimbi, C. (eds.). 2023. Justice during transitions: Policies that reflect African realities. Dakar: CODESRIA.
11 Pranis, K. 2015. *Little book of circle processes: A new/old approach to peacemaking.* Simon and Schuster.
12 Murambadoro, M. 2023. The case of Zimbabwe. In Wielenga, Cori and Nshimbi, Chris (eds). *Justice during transitions: Policies that reflect African realities.* Dakar: CODESRIA.
13 Wielenga, C. and Nshimbi, C. 2023. Justice during transitions.... Dakar: CODESRIA.



intuition and wisdom, and their broader understanding of the functioning of their community and their position within that. The resolution of each case is not only about the disputants, but also about reaffirming the authority and position of the traditional leader, as well as the structures, systems and processes that cohesively hold a community together.

The day-to-day work of conflict mediation that women traditional leaders, and traditional leaders more broadly do, is not widely recognised, legitimised or acknowledged. Yet, it deeply reflects and resonates with the context within which it is practiced. Conflict mediation by traditional leaders, especially in South Africa, is often criticised for being autocratic and undemocratic, understood through the lens of "liberal" ideas of democracy, rights and justice.[14] However, engaging with conflict mediation by traditional leaders on its own terms, and through the lens of relational approaches to mediation (as opposed to, for example, from a legal perspective), offers rich insights into the creative, innovative, transformative and relational ways in which conflicts are resolved.

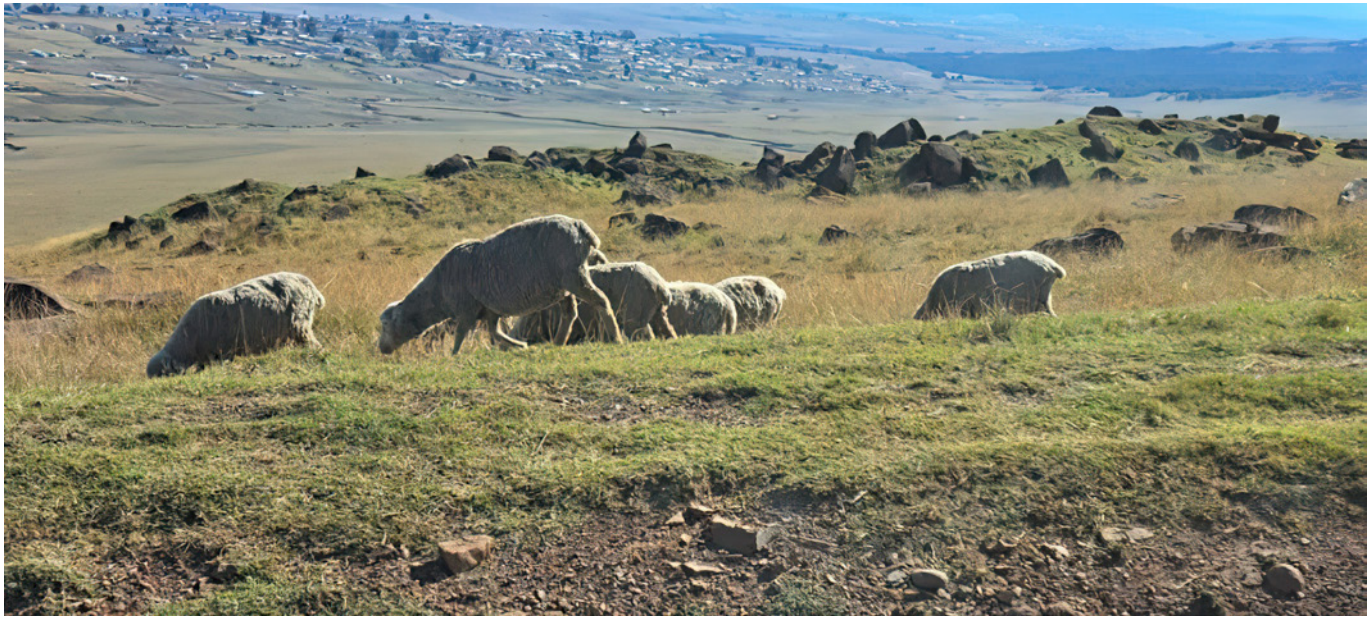
14 Notably, Ubink and Duda (2021) argue that part of the reason why traditional leadership in South Africa today has become undemocratic is because of the "ahistorical and authoritarian understanding of customary law and customary leadership" reflected in post-1994 laws and government interventions. They argue that the way people themselves understand customary leadership is different from the way the government does, as reflected in its legislation.

The way forward for women traditional leaders

Women traditional leaders are part of the fabric that hold communities together and play a significant role in resolving conflict and restoring relationships. They also significantly contribute to cultural preservation, governance, social welfare and economic development of rural South Africa. Their roles as queens, regents, traditional leaders and council members reflect some level of acceptance and recognition, despite prevailing historical cultural norms. These roles and authority are rooted in tradition, legitimacy and in their practical knowledge and experiences. The structural, cultural and political barriers they face are navigated by the traditional leaders through skill and sensitivity. However, women traditional leaders remain under-recognised and encounter strong resistance. Balancing contemporary gender equality expectations with traditional norms remains complex.

The following structural challenges must be addressed to move forward:

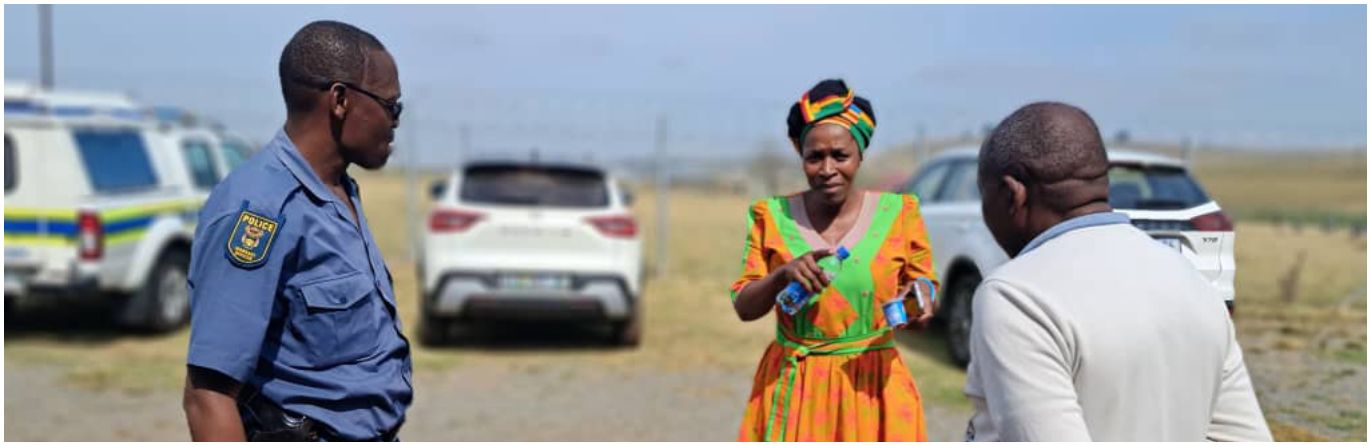
- First, multiple stakeholders are working on issues that women traditional leaders engage in daily, however, many actors are unaware of the significant contributions they make. It is important to promote the visibility of their work for greater awareness, respect and acceptance of their vital roles.
- Second, women traditional leaders are familiar with, and have helped to build local structures and networks that function well. Instead of creating parallel systems, stakeholders can help to strengthen these through shared platforms of communication, and access to basic tools such as transport, phones and data. Mutual recognition and stronger collaborations with government and their local councillors and municipalities will also help. Well-intentioned national policies risk failing without the involvement of traditional leaders in policy design and implementation, since they understand the realities of rural communities. Practically, platforms such as WhatsApp are effective, and considerations of language and format of policies can make it more accessible.
- Third, women traditional leaders' approach to resolving conflict is on restoring relationships, dignity and reintegration. This approach is well-suited to local contexts and requires greater understanding and appreciation of its value by formal systems. With adequate recognition, investment and support, women traditional leaders can help with conflict resolution, and bridging formal governance and lived experience.



Different stakeholders can play their part. To name but a few, the government can legally recognise the role of women traditional leaders in mediation and peacebuilding structures. Traditional councils can actively include or recognise the inputs of women traditional leaders in decision-making and succession disputes. Civil society organisations can provide training, legal aid, and platforms for knowledge exchange. Communities can continue to support, respect and engage women traditional leaders in dispute resolution. Academics and researchers can document and validate indigenous practices led by women traditional leaders.

The above can include tailored training on mediation with legal discussions on traditional law and customs and right-based frameworks; facilitating dialogues between traditional and state systems to bridge legal gaps; to support the transfer of intergenerational knowledge between older and younger women leaders; and promote storytelling to inspire and inform how peace resolution is done. This can be part of a mentoring framework that also supports succession planning to prepare future women traditional leaders, prevent or reduce royal succession disputes and ensure continuity in effective traditional governance.

The work of women traditional leaders in resolving everyday conflict is not peripheral—it is central to the social fabric of rural South Africa, and Africa more broadly. Supporting their work is not simply an act of inclusion or gender equity, it is a strategic necessity for building peace, resolving conflict, and strengthening governance at the community level. What is needed now, is for others to listen, support and walk alongside women traditional leaders.



Nkosi Jumba of the Jumba Traditional Council consults with a member of SAPS and a community member at the CMA-led training in conflict resolution in Tabisa, Eastern Cape.

The Everyday Practices of Women Traditional Leaders in Resolving Conflicts in South Africa

A Centre for Mediation in Africa project

Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria

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