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- Traditional authorities as partners in peace-building

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- New SDC strategy and guidelines for combating corruption
- COPRET launches new Lessons Learned project

## International Partner Organizations

## Events, Publications, Web tip

Publisher:  
Center for  
Peacebuilding KOFF  
Sonnenbergstrasse 17  
CH - 3000 Bern 7  
Tel: +41 (0)31 330 12 12  
[www.swisspeace.org/koff](http://www.swisspeace.org/koff)

## Focus

### Info

The author of this article, Tobias Hagmann, conducted extensive research on conflict and resource management by Somali elders in Ethiopia's eastern lowlands as part of swisspeace's environmental conflict research, sponsored by the NCCR North-South.

### Traditional authorities as partners in peace-building

**Elders, chiefs and other customary leaders play an increasingly important role in maintaining peace and security and managing public affairs in many developing countries where state bodies are unable or unwilling to assert authority. This „re-traditionalization“ of governance has been boosted by the erosion of the state's monopoly of violence, as well as by democratization and decentralization programs that promote or revive traditional authorities at local level. For peace-building and development actors, customary elders have become significant stakeholders in project implementation. This focus article reviews some of the key issues involved.**

In many parts of the world government resources, as well as the civil servants, are concentrated in the capital and major cities, while vast rural areas are effectively governed by non-state actors such as elders. Some of these customary authorities have played prominent roles in recent efforts to (re-) establish functioning state structures and resolve armed conflicts in various African, Middle Eastern and Asian countries.

A case in point is Afghanistan where the international community and national politicians have relied upon the „Loya Jirgah“, a national gathering of tribal leaders, to legitimize the political process spelled out by the „Bonn Agreement“ (2001) as well as to negotiate and endorse the new Afghan Constitution (2003/2004). In Somaliland clan elders were instrumental in ending bloodshed, negotiating peace agreements and defining new state institutions at the beginning of the 1990s. In numerous other African countries elders have formally or informally taken over core state functions including tax mobilization, natural resource management and conflict resolution. Whether or not this trend denotes a resurgence of tradition or, as some social anthropologists argue, points instead to the continuity of customary authority, the fact remains that traditional leaders are in many cases filling the space left by a retreating state bureaucracy.

### Paradoxical state-building practices

The collaboration with and support for traditional authorities by international organizations, NGOs and national governments may seem paradoxical in the light of the state- and nation-building activities incorporated into the international community's development and humanitarian agenda in the last two decades. Democratization, gender equity and respect for human rights are all hailed as cornerstones of „good governance“ inspired by Western democratic ideals. In reality however efforts to improve or to (re-)construct governance, particularly in post-conflict situations, are often hindered by the lack of coercive means, administrative capacity and political legitimacy of weak states.

### Instrumental approaches of external actors

How have external organizations involved in peace-building and development work reacted to this challenge? While it is difficult to generalize, there clearly are recurring patterns of cooperation and interaction between customary authorities and development agencies. External actors, particularly when confronted with

tribal and genealogically segmented societies, depend on the goodwill of elders, who continue to have considerable political standing, to reach their goals. Customary leaders can contribute to successful project implementation at many levels including community mobilization, conflict resolution, food aid delivery and ensuring physical security.

There are two reasons why both state and non-state external actors court traditional authorities. On the one hand, customary leaders are wanted for representative purposes as they are believed to embody and articulate community interests. The current donor rhetoric concerning the need to strengthen civil society and community-based organizations has reinforced this tendency. On the other hand, external actors are interested in elders' ability to enforce decisions within their community, thus facilitating project implementation. Hence, while some NGOs might not appreciate the undemocratic structures of certain customary bodies and their patriarchal practices, they adopt an instrumental approach in dealings with chiefs and elders.

### **The illusion of genuine authority**

Whatever the benefits or drawbacks, caution is required when collaborating with customary authorities in peace-building and development activities. Both elders and the external organizations that support them tend to believe in the veracity and moral superiority of customary authority. Whereas state bureaucrats and military officials are often assumed to be corrupt, elders are viewed in contrast as genuine, disinterested and wise leaders who act in accordance with long-lasting traditions and the best interests of their community. While this may be true in some cases, it is wrong to equate traditional leadership with genuine authority. Research into these so-called „traditions“ shows that they have often been invented in the framework of colonial and nation-building projects in the past two centuries. Governments have always been highly selective in the way they incorporate and recognize the customary leaders competing for state resources. Today the same elders and chiefs are competing for the benefits offered by internationally sponsored peace-building and development projects that are channeled through NGOs.

### **Customary rules for peacemaking**

Customary leaders are often highly experienced peacemakers who judge and settle disputes at community and inter-group levels without reference to statutory norms. Mediation and conflict resolution are among their core activities, and in this they deserve the support of external peace promoters. Before advocating Western models of alternative dispute resolution, peace-building organizations should, however, first try to understand the social context of local peacemaking traditions. Only then should they attempt to develop strategies to bridge the gaps between customary, religious and statutory legal norms. While it is important to acknowledge the discrepancy between universal standards of human rights and local customary norms as embodied by traditional leaders, the real challenge is to facilitate processes that can bridge the gap between the two. Rather than attempting merely to impose Western models, the various stakeholders should be motivated to document and critically discuss existing conflict resolution mechanisms and their weaknesses in an effort to develop locally acceptable rules.